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Majestic Presence: Narrating the Transgender Self in 21st-Century *Tamiḻakam*

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Majestic Presence: Narrating the Transgender Self in 21st-Century *Tamiḻakam*

by

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Dedication

தனிமையின் கண்ணீர் துளி போல
உறவுகளை துடைத்து விட்டோம்
நிர்வாண பொழுதின் ரத்தம் போல
அடையாளங்கள் மெல்ல மறைந்து போனது
நீண்ட நேரம் அடக்கிய மலம் போல
வெளியேறின சில புறச்சிக்கல்கள்
ஏதேதோ இழந்தும், பெற்றும்
கம்பீரமாய் நிற்கிறாள்
நான்
எனும் பெண்

"We have wiped off family ties like the tears of loneliness;
Trickling like the blood of castration, identities slowly disappeared;
Outside problems expelled, like shit held back for far too long;
Whatever is lost, whatever gained
She stands there majestically – a woman, me."

** Poem by Living Smile Vidya **

I dedicate this dissertation to Smiley, Revathi and Priya for speaking up and making a change. May these brave explorers of their own selves be known to everyone, and may their stories move us to take a brave look into ourselves, so that we can heal, connect and ever change into "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful."

Acknowledgements

In the final verses of her celebrated poetic work *Tiruppāvai*, a medieval Tamil mystic Andal, apologizes to Krishna for addressing him with pet names, but, she says, she does it அன்பினால், "out of love." I evoke this poetic moment because I would like to apologize to everyone below for using mere words to express my immense gratitude and love, not just for helping me on the path of getting a doctoral degree, but also for sustaining me over the years with their genuine interest and affection in all my wanderings. Therefore, with endless love and gratitude, thank you, hvala, merci, நன்றி, grazie:

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Priya Babu for her candor and guidance.

Revathi for making me cry.

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Majestic Presence: Narrating the Transgender Self in 21st-Century *Tamiḻakam*

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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Abstract: The purpose of this dissertation is to document the emergence of a new identity of Tamil transgender women as articulated by transgender women themselves through works of autobiographies (Revathi's *Veḷḷai mōḻi* and Living Smile Vidya's *Nān Vityā*), fiction (Priya Babu's novel *Mūṉṟām pāliṉ mukam*), or scholarship (Priya Babu's ethnography of her community *Aravāṇikaḷ, camūka varaiviyal*). I pay special attention to how these women articulate their selfhood and the identity of their community in reaction to the specificities of the South Indian context (association with religious festivals such as the Aravaṉ festival in Koovagam, and other transgender phenomena in the Indian subcontinent). Self-narration, especially for stigmatized people and communities is inextricably linked to overcoming traumatic experiences, and for asserting new identities. Speaking and writing about one's trauma can be a powerful force for transforming pain and loss into political action, and studying it can help us understand how trauma creates new possibilities of community and public culture that is as attentive to shame and alienation as it is to pride and solidarity. Therefore, I focus on trauma and stigma, as expressed in the aforementioned works, as vehicles for creating unique public cultures and artistic subjectivity.

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If they see
breasts and long hair coming
they call it woman,

if beard and whiskers
they call it man:

but, look, the self that hovers
in between
is neither man
nor woman.

-- Dāsimayya (10th-c. Indian poet)[1]

We're born naked, and the rest is drag.

-- RuPaul[2]

[1] This poem by Dāsimayya (10th c. Indian poet) in a way introduces this dissertation's fascination with narratives about self, and my musings on how it is constructed especially in relationship to gender (Ramanujan, A. K. *Speaking of Siva*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1973: 110). This poem is also an homage to A. K. Ramanujan's scholarship and translation of stories and poetry that occupied many of my own imaginings of *Tamiḻakam* and India in general. Ramanujan's poetry most importantly led me intellectually to my advisor Dr. Martha Selby who has shared over these many years many of her own stories with me, as a teacher, colleague and friend, and also acutely sharpened my senses to the unique Tamil articulations of emotional landscapes. Even more importantly, Dr. Selby has always had the greatest patience to compassionately deal with my "glamor fits."

[2] RuPaul is the best known American drag performer, author, TV personality and source of inspiration to thousands of people with her messages of personal empowerment. Her own articulations about the nature of gender are epitomized in the statement above, which, I believe echoes the same profound realizations about what any identity actually is, so as the Dāsimayya poem.

Preface

The writings I have considered here are autobiographies by Living Smile Vidya (*Nān Vitiyā*, 'I Am Vidya,' 2007) and Revathi (*Veḷḷai moḻi,* published in English as *The Truth about Me*, 2010), books of ethnographic writing by Revathi (*Uṇarvum Uruvamum*, 'the body and feelings,' 2005) and Priya Babu (*Aravāṉikaḷ: camūka varaiviyal*, 'aravāṉis; an ethnography,' 2007), as well as a novel by Priya Babu (*Mūṉṟam pāliṉ mukam*, 'the face of third gender,' 2008). These authors are all public figures, well-known in the media and literary world, and I take them as representatives of the rhetorical public sphere that they form in reaction to what I call *Tamiḻakam*, (the Tamil term for Tamil socio-cultural space, rather than just geographically delineated as in the name of the Indian state – Tamil Nadu), whose temporal and spatial specificities are discussed in the content chapters.

I have decided to use the Tamil word *tirunaṅkai* (popularly spelled *tirunangai*) rather than *aravāṇi* when referring to Tamil transgender women for the purpose of this study. The latter term was essential for the newly- found voice of Tamil transgender activists in the first decade of this century because it was self-chosen – thus eradicating former terms deemed derogatory by the transgender community of Tamil Nadu – and also

because it was linked to an annual Hindu festival celebrating a local Tamil deity called Aravāṉ, in which the tirunangais' ritual participation was highly visible and encouraged. Both terms are still widely used in the Tamil (and English) media in Tamil Nadu. However, since *aravāṇi* has religious connotations some Tamil transgender activists (such as Living Smile Vidya) think that tirunangai is a more suitable term because it is secular, and therefore more neutral (*naṅkai* means lady, *tiru-* is an honorific prefix). Tirunaṅkai also has its verso in *tirunampi*, the term for a transgender man. Both *aravani* and *tirunangai* have very recent linguistic history in connection with transgender persons in Tamil Nadu.

When I use the word 'transgender' I refer to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) definition: "An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth."[3] This definition is open enough, and importantly so, for my discussion of tirunangais' identities regardless of the surgical procedures they may have undergone.

The introductory essay that follows this preface has a performative character in order to find meaning in framing and analyzing the objects of this dissertation research which are all various types of self-narratives written by Tamil transgender women in, more or less, the past ten years. This performativity is based on my understanding of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reading of J. L. Austin's "performative utterances," especially in reference to shame as one of the primary forces in any identity making (but especially

[3] "GLAAD Media Reference Guide - Transgender Issues." *GLAAD*, September 9, 2011. http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender.

queer).[4] The introductory essay's purpose is to explain my positionality, offer solutions to issues of representation in my particular case of study, and thus to explain my own methodology which must not simply be abridged to "close reading of texts."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alf Hiltebeitel's article "Dying Before the Mahabharata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-Building for Aravan" (1995) is very valuable for my study because it provides a thorough description of the Aravan festival in Koovagam.[5] As a religious-studies scholar, Hiltebetel is primarily interested in tirunangais as ritual participants in a cult that he sees as an offshoot of the so-called cult of Draupadī, a *Mahabharata* epic heroine who is worshipped as a goddess in South India.

In accordance with a philological bias that dominated scholarship on South Asia in much of the twentieth century, most scholars focused on the study of the so-called third sex to which there are many references in ancient Sanskrit texts (O'Flaherty 1982; Zwilling and Sweet 1996; Goldman 1993).[6] Scholarship on transgendered devotees (*jogammas*) in the cult of goddess Yellamma in the South Indian state of Karnataka (Bradford 1983; Assayag 1992) is pertinent for my research because it discusses, among other things, *jogammas'*

[4] See Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2003.

[5] Alf Hiltebeitel, "Dying Before the Mahabharata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-Building for Aravan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 447–73.

[6] See O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. Reprint edition. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1982; Assayag, Jackie. *La Colère de La Déesse Décapitée: Traditions, Cultes et Pouvoir Dans Le Sud de l'Inde*. Paris: CNRS, 1992; Bradford, Nicholas. "Transgenderism and the Cult of Yellamma: Heat, Sex, and Sickness in South Indian Ritual." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 307–22.

association with the Yellamma temple and their ritualized marriage to Yellamma's husband, and thus sheds more light on the relationship between Goddess worship and transgender people in India. Jennifer Ung Loh,'s study of Bahuchara Mata, a type of Hindu village goddess, worshipped by many transgender women in Gujarat and Maharashtra in India, is also relevant for the same reason.[7]

The first full-scale, and ethnographic, study of Indian transgenders was a monograph by Serena Nanda *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1990) focusing on North Indian transgender wome, *hijras*.[8] Nanda defines *hijras* as occupying an alternative gender role, distinct from either men or women. She draws comparisons with the American Indian *berdache,* the *xanith* of Oman, and the *mahu* in Tahiti. Nanda's work is important for extricating *hijras* from the category of deviance that marked much of colonial preoccupation with *hijras,* and for providing *hijras*' detailed personal narratives.

My chief model for a successful study of Indian transgender people is Gayatri Reddy's ethnography *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (2005), in which she questions the common understanding of *hijras* as the personification of third-sexed individuals in India.[9] Nanda analyzed *hijras* primarily as a sexual or gendered category without taking into account broader contexts of everyday life in South Asia with a multiplicity of other factors contributing to identity formation. Reddy, however, in accord

[7] See Jennifer Ung Loh, "Narrating Identity: The Employment of Mythological and Literary Narratives in Identity Formation Among the Hijras of India," *Religion and Gender* 4, no. 1 (June 23, 2014): 21–39.
[8] Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Wadsworth Modern Anthropology Library. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co, 1990.
[9] Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

with Lawrence Cohen (1995),[10] argues that the axis of sexual difference through which the *hijras* have traditionally been understood is itself constructed by a range of other identity markers including embodiment, religion, and class.

Reddy finds that *hijra* communities in Hyderabad have complex codes of *izzat* (respect), determined by a range of factors that extend far beyond the body and sexual or gender difference. She further provides detailed accounts of *hijras'* religious practices and of the way they formulate their own unique kinship structures. With respect to the former, for example, she illustrates the fluidity of *hijras'* identities considering that they identify as Muslim and yet participate in Hindu rituals, especially those related to the worship of goddess Bahuchara Mata. In my view, Reddy's greatest accomplishment is that she shows us how Hyderabadi transgenders' lives extend beyond categories of sex and gender, and depicts *hijras* as multidimensional individuals who are not only sex workers, but also ascetics, members of a complex kinship system, artists, and most importantly active negotiators of their own identity.

Ted Samuel's dissertation (Samuel, Theodore Aaron. "Performing Thirunangai: Activism, Development, and Normative Citizenship in Tamil Transgender Performances." 2015) investigates how tirunangais use performance art to strengthen their social movement and, more broadly, redefine expectations of normative citizenship. Samuel's research looks at tirunangai-generated performed representations in dance venues, filmed interviews,

[10] Cohen, Lawrence. "The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas, and Academics." In *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*, edited by Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

autobiographical films, and a popular transgender beauty pageant, which coincides in Viluppuram with the Aravāṉ festivities in Koovagam.

Theoretically, this dissertation is an exploration of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's perspicacious observations about the relationship between shame and queer performativity (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 2003). According to her, shame is the primary and permanent factor in forming a queer person's identity. In it, she suggests, lie possibilities for social transformations through performativity.

Apart from Sedgwick's influence, my methodological approach owes much to thinkers and ethnographers such as Kathleen Stewart (for inspiring me to actively engage with my own everyday life and look for "shimmering" objects, in order to understand the workings of complex and abstract mechanisms such as culture, social change, and so on), Kamala Visweswaran (for her incisive examination of the role of a feminist – I read *queer* – ethnographer), and especially to Ann Cvetkovich for broadening the semantic scope of the term *trauma*, and thus the scope of trauma studies. Anthropologist Michael Jackson's writings on the therapeutic properties of self-narration in dealing with traumatic past have been most useful for understanding both tirunangais' and my own need to tell the stories of self in order to be able to go on with normal living after suffering traumatic, identity-shattering experiences.[11]

ARGUMENT

[11] See Jackson, Michael. *Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen [Denmark]: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002.

I argue that tirunangai writings are proactive instances of responding to the history of oppression – which is epistemologically inscribed in such crucial identity-making texts as British colonial ethnographic writings, but also in more autochthonous pieces such as classical Tamil literary and religious texts – by the very virtue of being written in the first-person voice by tirunangais themselves.

More specifically, these writings are, I suggest, rhetorical instances of coming out, most effectively communicated in the form of self-identification through self-narration, either autobiographically (Revathi's and Smiley's memoirs) or ethnographically (Revathi's and Priya Babu's ethnographic publications). This "representational contract" (Sedgwick's understanding of the process of coming out as a constant process of negotiating one's story in the world as the story's owner – my paraphrase) is drawn around the definitions of their personal and collective transgender bodies on the one hand, and their larger social world, which is in our case *Tamiḻakam* (Tamil cultural, rather than geographical, landscape). The world tirunangais represent themselves to is, thus more specifically, Tamil society's discursive construction of gender, and transgender identity on the one hand, and on the other hand the western construction of tirunangais and other marginalized groups in India that began in the colonial period, and was perpetuated later in the post-Independence period.

The methodological approach is itself propositional and thus presents an argument in itself. I argue for a methodological approach which, in lack of better words, I call an 'ethnography of empathy,' and which should systematically examine an ethnographer's identities, especially those relevant for the ethnographer's study's topic of research. I

propose this type of approach after a profound realization that I had become entangled in the philosophical and political issue of representing tirunangais because I had not been able to honestly face *my own* sets of various identities which, I also had understood, were structured around shame, or, to be more precise (following Sedgwick's reading of Tomkins) the fear of being denied communication with others.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1: *Wayfaring* to Koovagam: Embodied Stories, Traveling Places

In this chapter I engage with the myths (stories) and their mutability and potential for all-inclusivity in order to understand how the myth of Aravāṉ's wedding to transgendered Krishna in the village of Kovagam became one of the most defining ones in the 1990s, and most instrumental in bringing together disparate transgender individuals and groups of transgender women. By doing so, I explore older dimensions of *Tamiḻakam*, which I define as the Tamil public sphere.[12] I engage with *how* (because, this is, in many respects, the study of *how* identities happen, not which ones) myths and stories of significant places in the South Indian geographical places became tied into the language and stories of the people who inhabit them. For this reason, I play with the concept of *pāṭalpeṟṟa*/*pukaḻpeṟṟa iṭam* (lit. place that has received a song, praise) from Tamil devotional (bhakti) literature to consider how singing/telling stories can be used to create cultural, spatial, and other

[12] The indigenous Tamil term, first used to refer to the "traditional domain of the three royal dynasties of the Chola, Chera, and Pandya," and then in the twentieth century to underline nationalist Tamil ideologies that develop, as in many other places in India, in tandem with various colonial interpretations of this region (Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004: 107).

identities. Special attention is given to understanding how epic stories have been appropriated by various groups in Tamil and other South Asian territories.

The role of Devī, a name subsuming various manifestations of Hindu goddesses, is also explored here, especially as a catalyst and model for transgender metamorphoses. Further, I detail how tirunangais have engaged with the Aravan myth in the past twenty or so years, as well as ask why it has been so tremendously useful in producing a whole new set of culturally viable identities. By using Sedgwick's concept of the "periperformative" in reference to J. L. Austin's work on performative utterances, I suggest we read tirunangais' annual re-enactment of the Aravan myth as proto-autobiographical.

Chapter 2: Tirunangai Self-Narratives: "A Medicine for the Wounds of the Heart"

In this chapter I focus on tirunangai self-narratives as the paradigms of performative writing and I claim that they are instances of "coming out," which I take as "a way of staking one's claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of the representational contract between one's body and one's world."[13] Thinking through Eve Sedgwick's scholarship on the relationship between gay performativity and shame, Ann Cvetkovich's concept of queer trauma, as well as Michael Jackson's work on storytelling as a powerful palliative for trauma victims, I look at Living Smile Vidya's *Nān Vitiyā* ('I Am Vidya,' 2007) and Revathi's *Veḷḷai moḻi* (published in English as *The Truth about Me*,

[13] Moon, Michael, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "Divinity: A Dossier a Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion." *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 12–39: 27.

2010) as instances of queer performativity negotiating inescapably painful experiences of shame and stigma. Revathi's account of being moved by her fellow tirunangais' stories in her collection of tirunangai life stories *Uṇarvum uruvamum* (2005) served as a profound illustration of the therapeutic quality of sharing stories about personal traumatic and shameful experiences, both to Revathi and to me (as explained in the forthcoming introductory essay).

Chapter 3: Their Own Ethnography: Priya Babu's *Aravāṉikaḷ Camūka Varaiviyal*

In this chapter, I read an ethnography of Tamil transgender women (*Aravāṇikaḷ, camūka varaiviyal*, 2007), written by Priya Babu, Tamil transgender activist, as another type of self-narrative representation by tirunangais. More specifically, I take this text to be the most fully realized "representational contract,"[14] of all the tirunangai texts I have read for this dissertation because Priya Babu uses the greatest oppressor of all, an alien epistemological system (in the form of ethnography as a genre), to claim the privilege of nomenclature and definitions of all things tirunangai. By taking the genre of ethnography into her own hands, Priya Babu effectively strikes against the criminalizing and oppressive anthropological discourses employed by the British colonial administrators in the nineteenth century, which have persisted as the principal impediments to genuine progress in postcolonial times.

Priya strategically shifts the definition of who transgender women are from the

[14] Ibid.

biological (absence of the male organ) to the psychological ("feeling like a woman"), while also underscoring her community's sense of solidarity due to shared experiences of trauma and oppression. Her goal is to eliminate social stereotypes focusing on castration and supposed deviant sexual behavior by showing to mainstream society that her community has all the requisite cultural elements ("just like" any other Indian religious or ethnic community), and that therefore tirunangais can and must join the ranks of mainstream society as rightful citizens. By portraying tirunangai community as one built on solidarity and love (not caste, ethnicity or religion), Priya also suggests that transgender people should represent ideal citizens of India.

Conclusion

In the final chapter, I tie together some of the dissertation's main themes and topics in the following fashion: 1) by revisiting the tirunangai Living Smile Vidya's poem used epigraphically after the beginning of this dissertation I draw further parallels between the poetic voices of Tamil Hindu devotional literature (bhakti) and the voices of the tirunangai representatives; here, I also add further dimensions to our understanding of "divinity" and "glamor fits," terms I use theoretically following Sedgwick's stipulations about the relationship between queer performativity and shame;[15] 2) by discussing Beyoncé's feminist anthem *Flawless* (2013), I further describe the same concept ("divinity"); 3) by analyzing Priya Babu's novel *Mūn̲rām pāli̲n̲ mukam* ('the face of the third gender"), I

[15] Moon, Michael, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "Divinity: A Dossier A Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion." *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 12–39.

effectively review Chapter 3, that is, Priya Babu's ethnography of her community, as well as probe inquiries into the potential of 3rd-person narratives as representational narratives; and 4) I provide final thoughts on the "ethnography of empathy" proposed in the introductory essay.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Wherever I could I followed this rule: Indic words are written according to transliteration conventions for Tamil, Sanskrit and other Indian languages, and italicized, but only the first time they are mentioned. This is not applied to personal, place and caste names, and other such cases. In all other instances, I have decided to use popular spellings in Roman letters without diacritics to make the text more accessible to those unacquainted with these conventions.

Introduction: Toward an Ethnography of Empathy Or Nikola's MAJOR "Glamor Fit"[16]

Fear not! You're not alone. There are others but you
Who to you unknown live your life.
And all that passed, that you heard and dreamt of,
Burns in others, as fiercely, plainly rife.

Tin Ujević (from poem *The Brotherhood of People in Universe*)[17]

Now see I
That warmth's the very stuff of poesy.

-- T. E. Hulme (from poem *The Embankment*)[18]

But the living
all make the same mistake: they distinguish too sharply.

-- Rainer Maria Rilke (from *Duino Elegies*)[19]

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[16] A theoretical and performative term that I will explain in the course of this Introduction. The following essay has a performative character in order to find meaning in framing and analyzing the objects of this dissertation research which are all various types of self-narratives written by Tamil transgender women in, more or less, the past ten years. In other words, the introductory essay is an introduction to my methodology.

[17] My translation of an excerpt of the poem by the great twentieth-century Croatian poet Tin Ujević. The semantics of the lyrics will be obvious, hopefully, when conjoined with the ensuing text. I "steal" Ujević's piece from my essay on our readings on patina in Dr. Kathleen Stewart's course on affect which completely transformed my epistemological universe, and, with no exaggeration, the way I understood life itself. Ujević also connects me to my non-Indian and non-American homeland, which does not necessarily correspond to the current geographical shape of Croatia. This poetry, among many other things, connects me to my long-passed grandfather and namesake who claimed that he had gotten drunk with the notoriously bohemian poet in one of Zagreb's downtown cafes and bars that both men frequently visited.

[18] This verse by T. E. Hulme pithily encapsulates main intellectual and artistic endeavors of this, not often widely acknowledged, British poet-philosopher and public intellectual, whose preoccupation was how to artistically render non-intellectualized awareness, such as intuition and emotion. Hence, it aptly augurs some of the main topics and concerns in my dissertation. Also, this poem's subtitle (*The fantasia of a fallen gentleman on a cold, bitter night.*) perfectly summarizes what a written PhD dissertation seemed like (fantasy) to me (definitely fallen gentleman) at the onset of this project. But, most importantly, this particular poem connects me to my dear friend Parvati Sharma, a published Indian author of short stories, whose early story *Ranoo* literally linked us and made us friends fifteen years ago: first epistolary ones us via a mutual friend, and later real-life ones. This poem was sent to me by Parvati in our epistolary phase, when we were testing each other's aesthetic tastes (so perfectly matching to our delight). Parvati's real and fictitious universes, populated by Delhi and Bangalore's gays and genderqueers, opened up completely new vistas of how I understand India and myself.

[19] From "The First Elegy," Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies: A Bilingual Edition*. Translated by Edward Snow. 1st edition. New York: North Point Press, 2001: 9. *Duino Elegies* and Rilke connect me to the beginning of my wondrous friendship with Emilia Bachrach, who, as all her friends and colleagues know, is

Have you seen *Sita Sings the Blues*? I have been an admirer of this quirky animated film since before it was even released as a full feature film in 2008.[20] In it, the author Nina Paley juxtaposes her own experience of being deserted by her long-term partner with the plight of heroine *Sītā* in the ancient Indian epic *Ramāyāṇa*. One of the central stories of this popular epic is the kidnapping of the heroine Sita by the main antagonist *Rāvāṇa*. Sita's husband *Rāma* defeats Ravana and his demonic armies, and ultimately saves his wife, but the issue of Sita's faithfulness in his absence becomes for Rama a personal and political problem, and he exiles her, even after she was proven unsullied in a trial by fire.

Empathizing with Sita, Paley – trained as a cartoon artist – inscribes her very personal predicament into the film about Sita as a side story: Paley and her partner live happily in a San Francisco apartment; he gets an opportunity to work in South India for a short period of time; he goes there and she visits soon, yet finds him distant; while there, she learns of the Ramayana epic; upon her return to the U.S. her partner breaks up with her on the phone; in her heartbreak, Paley remembers Sita from the stories she read and heard while in India, and creates a sassy and irreverent heroine in bold and vivacious vector-graphic animation, voiced by the 1930s radio jazz singer Annette Hanshaw (i.e., her songs

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the greatest connecter among us all and someone whom I view as a true embodiment of compassionate interaction not only among people, but also with the entire world around her. This verse, together with an earlier one from the same elegy ("the sly animals see at once\ how little at home we are\ in the *interpreted* world" [italics mine]) foreshadows my overall concern with how gender and sexual categories are culturally and politically constructed, and the danger of not being aware of them. It is also an example of art in the form of written word that nurtured me and encouraged in moments of personal suffering. To borrow words from Revathi, it was "a medicine for the wounds of the heart."

[20] Paley circulated Sita songs as individual short animated movies long before the rest of the film could even be envisaged, let alone finished.

as preserved on records). Therefore, the title: Sita *sings* the blues. In short, Nina Paley performatively used her own suffering experience by commiserating with a fictitious character and transformed it into an original and very feminist interpretation of the ancient epic, deeply infused with personal cathartic and therapeutic revelations.

But what does this have to do with a dissertation, whose topic purports to be somehow related to Tamil transgender women? A lot, I claim. First, it theoretically provides a very useful frame for explaining my own positionality in regard to the potentially very sensitive topic, and relates me to the very thing that I claim to be investigating in this dissertation: the rhetorical space articulated by Tamil transgender women in their writings, which were all published in the first decade of the twentieth century. In other words, *Sita Sings the Blues* – suggesting Indian epic, and other, narrative techniques involving intricate story-within-story framing – provides a useful narrative strategy for me in my own discomfort of being in a position to speak for someone who does not necessarily share the same epistemological space.

This dissertation is not about me, but it is permeated by me and, finally, told by me. This obvious fact has not always been so obvious to me. However, I certainly became keenly aware of it last year when I participated in a dissertation writing boot camp. Dean Raizen, who was one of the organizers, announced in its inaugural class that she was very happy to see so many dissertation topics that were so deeply personal. I was chosen to participate in the boot camp based on a chapter I had submitted, which was on self-narratives by Tamil transgender women. Indeed, the more I thought about it, the more I

realized that dean Raizen was right: my dissertation was much more personal than I was willing to admit to myself. Let me go back in time.

Early in 2014, during my fieldwork in Chennai, my then partner of several years broke up with me – in a, to me then, unforeseen decision – setting me off on a precarious path of self-pity and substance dependency which seriously undermined my academic progress and, more notably, all my relationships with other people. Broken, broke and painfully alone, I returned to Austin to commence what I dreaded the most: turning fieldwork research into a dissertation. I decided to start with a chapter on autobiographies written by Revathi and Living Smile Vidya; I had read them previously with the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) teachers in Madurai, and I felt ready to start conceptualizing what they meant for my research.

Rereading them proved to be an entirely novel experience, for I reread them as a defeated person, as then I truly was in the aftermath of my breakup, immediately emotionally connecting to the narratives of suffering and loss. I was particularly struck and moved by the rawness of Revathi's narrative techniques in which she mercilessly unloads, to the reader's utter disbelief, one catastrophic experience after another. Of course, I bawled my eyes out when she talks about her failed "marriage" and the subsequent feelings of loss and shame. It was in that moment that I realized that I was being deeply affected by Revathi's personal suffering, and even more so by her sheer determination to survive against all odds. I wanted to get better too.

For the first time in the entire project, I felt personally engaged when I started writing the autobiography chapter, and felt satisfaction upon its completion. As a reward

for writing the chapter I received a Continuing Named Writing Fellowship from the University of Texas Graduate School. This was more than a welcome boost to my emotional wellbeing in those dark days. Also, around this time, after yet another crippling "episode," I sought professional mental-health counselling in order to finally and actively engage with the issues around my breakup. During the process of healing, I realized that just like Revathi and Living Smile Vidya, I also needed to have my story told, because I had not shared it with anyone before in a meaningful way. Because I was ashamed. Finding words was excruciating, but therapeutic. I articulated my story. I "owned" it. Things got better.

It is not that I recognize in Nina Paley's film structural similarities with my own life, even though it would be easy to draw a couple of obvious parallels. Rather, it is the affectively charged *how* of being moved in compassion for an unknown person (the narrative *Revathi* was as foreign to me as, I suppose, whichever *Sita* was to Nina Paley) that interests me here. Both my namesake Nina (my familial nickname is Nino) and I connected – with our respective narrated co-sufferers, and also, it could be argued, with one another – over the fact of being moved by someone else's story in our moments of suffering.

In Paley's case, the consequence of her empathetic engagement is her subversive reworking of the Ramayana epic in a majorly creative outburst, providing her ultimately with a needed therapeutic avenue to overcome heartbreak and all its accompanying messiness. The consequence of my empathetic engagement is that it not only made me more observant of instances of commiserating with people in general, but also, and more

importantly for the present study, acutely perceptive of the compassionate rhetorical engagements and interactions in the research material that I often felt clueless about how to tackle.

As a result, this approach allowed me to discuss Revathi's relationship with the stories she had collected by interviewing her fellow transgender women, and how they affected herself as a person, writer and activist. This mode of inquiry also cast clearer light on Revathi's non-transgender influences in matters of political activism, such as autobiographic and experimental writing by the Dalit writer and activist Bamu (Dalit is a common South Asian term encompassing various groups considered to be outside the four-tier orthodox Hindu varṇa system), which deeply moved Revathi and showed her the power of this artistic form of expression. Of course, this methodological lens also proved to be fruitful for analyzing Priya Babu's ethnography and her definition of Tamil transgender women as compassionate, and therefore ideal, Indian citizens. But, most importantly, this method allows me to have an honest and transparent relationship with my scholarly work, which has the potential to become, as it has for Revathi, "a medicine for the wounds of the heart."[21]

The realization of my own lack of identity transparency led me to thinking of a different methodological approach which I tentatively call an ethnography of empathy. Empathically involved scholarship, I suggest, provides me with a method of researching a historically marginalized group of people, such as Tamil transgender women, which could

[21] Reference to the therapeutic effect that writing about herself had for Revathi; see Rēvati, *Veḷḷai moḻi: aravāṉiyiṉ taṉvaralāṟu* (Puttanattam: Aṭaiyāḷam, 2011).

address some important observations raised by postcolonial scholars. Ever since Edward Said's *Orientalism* and, especially, Gayatri Spivak's tremendously influential (and tremendously pessimistic) article "Can the Subaltern Speak?," has the issue of representing others been of vital epistemological concern for scholars working on geographical areas with histories of colonial exploitation, such as India, for instance. Both Said and Spivak, building up on critical theory formulated by French thinkers such as Derrida, Deleuze, and Michel Foucault, underline the fact that no system of knowledge is innocent of the interests of its creators, and that it thus is deeply integrated in, if not completely constituting, political and economic power itself.

In other words, how do I as a white gay man of Mittel-European cultural background, speak for transgender women of a South Indian state, in a language discursively constructed by and for western academia, to which these women have not typically had access to? Is my gayness sufficiently politically correct to represent Tamil transgender women? In short, my answer is: it must not be the only point of contact! A very good and well-documented example of the inadequacy of a researcher's queerness to represent transgender people I find illustrated by the case of the lesbian filmmaker Jennie Livingston whose documentary film *Paris is Burning* (1991) records the late-1980s New York "drag ball" scene largely populated by the impoverished urban non-white queer and transgender youths.

In his essay on Judith Butler's instrumental force in yoking transgender to queer studies in the 1990s, Jay Prosser posits how much scholarship on transgender people served to illustrate Butler's ideas of drag as the example of gender performativity in her hugely

influential work *Gender Trouble* (Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999).[22] Livingston's documentary appeared immediately following the big bang of a release of *Gender Trouble*, and, of course, because it was about all about drag – the 'it' referring to *Paris Is Burning*, not *Gender Trouble*, which delegates only five pages to drag art as the epitome of gender performativity and, hypothetical paradigm of gender subversion[23] – it soon drew the attention of many scholars interested in gender and sexuality, and became exposed to their intense scrutiny. Prosser, for example, notices that Livingston's representation of transsexual individuals in the film clearly reveals her strong editorial intervention, especially in how she eroticizes the protagonists Venus Extravaganza and Octavia St. Laurent by directorially framing them in their domestic settings and having them speak of their dreams and aspirations, by using the language structured around having or not having a penis.[24]

But the problems were not only confined to Livingston's editorial handling of the matter. Namely, the film, somewhat unexpectedly, became quite successful, collecting the grand jury prize at the 1991 Sundance film festival, and even commercially as it was picked for distribution by the then young company Miramax. Soon after, some of the main protagonists sued the author and Miramax for a share in its profits. More recently in 2015, an online petition was started by the Brooklyn Trans/Queer People of Color (TQPOC) and

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[22] See Jay Prosser, "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 257–81.

[23] Others have found paradigms in other embodiments. For example, Prosser argues elsewhere for the transsexual, and not cross-dressing, body as the model of this subversion. For this see Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

[24] Prosser, "Judith Butler," 276.

Ballroom community accusing Livingston's movie as "an anthropological foray into the lives of low-income TQPOC ballroom members, through years of lies and dishonesty."[25]

By the mid-1990s, most of the film's main protagonists had died of HIV/AIDS-related illnesses and/or poverty and crime: Venus Extravaganza's body was found strangled and crammed under a bed in a dingy hotel before the film was even completed. How does any author or researcher incorporate actual death in their art and research? How do we even start talking about other people's suffering—suffering that is not commonplace, apologetic, and abstractedly removed? Livingston's unpopularity with the TQPOC ballroom members can, I believe, be attributed to the lack of her *emotional* engagement with the community as the online petition's demands and comments illustrate: Livingston didn't "give a DAMN in some **real** [emphasis mine] way."[26]

I have been aware of the controversy around *Paris is Burning* for years, and its sour taste is one of the reasons why the issue of representing others, especially subaltern ones, has preoccupied my thinking in my research of the writings by transgender people of India. A strong encouragement toward a more vulnerable and compassionate type of reading and writing came to me from encountering Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's musings on being queer

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[25] "Celebrate Brooklyn!, BRIC, Jennie Livingston, and JD Samson: Cancel Celebrate Brooklyn/BRIC's Screening of Paris Is Burning & End the Exploitation of the Ballroom Community and TQPOC! #ParisIsBurnt #SHUTITDOWN." *Change.org*. Accessed May 19, 2016. https://www.change.org/p/celebrate-brooklyn-bric-jennie-livingston-and-jd-samson-cancel-celebrate-brooklyn-bric-s-screening-of-paris-is-burning-end-the-exploitation-of-the-ballroom-community-and-tqpoc-parisisburnt-shutitdown.
For more information about the controversy read: Green, Jesse. "Paris Has Burned." *The New York Times*, April 18, 1993, sec. Style. http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/18/style/paris-has-burned.html and Clark, Ashley. "Burning down the House: Why the Debate over Paris Is Burning Rages on." *The Guardian*, June 24, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/24/burning-down-the-house-debate-paris-is-burning.

[26] See fn. 8.

as a fat woman, as well as her proposal for so-called reparative reading. Sedgwick's inimitable wit, fearless and *kind* intelligence, and disarming honesty, influenced me greatly, and her scholarship/art serve as a model of the kind of intellectual engagement that I am inspired to emulate.

In fragments in other writings, but most pronouncedly in the essay titled *Divinity*, Sedgwick theoretically and performatively questioned her fascination, as a fat woman, with gay men, who crowded her theoretical and intimate spaces as colleagues, friends and life companions.[27] In *Divinity*, Sedgwick and her gay co-author, Michael Moon, playfully engage in a dialogue about the similarities between gay men and fat women in a culture which hates fat and queer kids, and degrades fat women's bodies. More generally, they suggest, gay and fat people of all genders are more vulnerable to rhetorical and actual violence, more exploitative, more declassed, insufficiently gendered in the eyes of others, and both fearful of their supposedly unhealthy desires.[28]

Sedgwick tells her dream: she cannot find her own size clothes in a department store; when she finds them, they are marked by a pink triangle. Analyzing her dream, and thinking through Catherine Gallagher's reading of Thomas Malthus and his idea of the human body representing social and economic body as a whole, Sedgwick links her fatness to an anxiety familiar to everyone who has been denied a stake under capitalism, articulated

[27] Could this, perhaps, explain then why I never *felt* particularly attracted to the taciturnly difficult prose of Judith Butler – Sedgwick's intellectual mate in founding queer theory and queer studies in the 1990s – always prefaced in my mind by her bony and Jodie Fosteresquely supercilious face?

[28] Moon, Michael, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "Divinity: A Dossier A Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion." *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 12–39.

in the sentence: "There's nothing here for you to spend your money on."[29] '"[L]ike the black family looking to buy a house in the suburbs, the gay couple looking to rent an apartment, [and] the handicapped high-school kid visiting a barrier-ridden college in the Ivy League," Sedgwick's fatness joins with those whose bodies are offensive to capitalist society; the point of connection is a kind of anxiety, not caused by never having enough money, but, rather, rooted in the realization that "one's very body [is] a kind of cul-de-sac blockage or clot in the circulation of economic value."[30]

Sedgwick and Moon found a paradigm in Divine, a fat drag queen, the late heroine of John Waters' early camp-defining films, as "a powerful condensation of some emotional and identity linkages - historically dense ones - between fat women and gay men."[31] In Divine, they also find an embodiment of their concept of a feeling or attitude of *divinity*, which, catalyzed by a particular amalgam of abjection and defiance, produces a kind of "divinity-effect in the subject, a compelling belief that one is a god or a vehicle of divinity."[32] Divine, Sedgwick remarks, referred to a particular kind of feeling as "glamor fits;" for example, in Divine's case it could be her feeling that she is "the most beautiful woman in the world."[33] More simply put, we can understand these "glamor fits," as a particular form of gay performativity which exists in relation to shame (or any other person

[29] Gallagher, Catherine. "The Body Versus the Social Body in the Works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew." *Representations*, no. 14 (1986): 83–106.
Ibid., 14.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 15.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

whose identity is particularly strongly formed as the consequence of negotiating or avoiding shame).

I borrow Divine's fabulous phrase 'glamor fits' for the alternate title of this introductory essay, having understood, in a rather revelatory manner, that my desire for creativity and performativity must stem from the same shame/abjection-defiance construct, i.e., as a consequence thereof, and that I believe that I have felt *divine* on many occasions, this one being a major one. My current *divinity*, in paraphrase, could be described as pretense of grandeur of a previously fallen, gay gentleman on a cold, bitter night of his dissertation finishing (referring again to the subtitle in Hume's poem *The Embankment*, namely *The fantasia of a fallen gentleman on a cold, bitter night*).

And then a very strange thing happened: while I was thinking about how to argue my positionality as an ethnographer of "subaltern" persons, by reading Sedgwick's personal account of a particularly visceral commiseration with gay people in her dream (and her realization that, as a fat woman, she shares very similar and deep anxieties that many gay people have: the anxiety of having a body that is offensive to society), I had a profound understanding of my own obsessive need to defend my positionality. In short, I realized that my reluctance to speak for others stemmed from a profound anxiety about my own identities; that I felt it was not ethical on a very elemental level to speak about other people's identities without first intrepidly inspecting my own. But who does that? Kamala Visweswaran, faced with the ethnographer-as-trickster dilemma, advises that feminist ethnographers should "seek out new possibilities engendered by the recognition of failure,

as well as the limiting features of its acknowledgment."[34] Indeed, the recognition of my failure shifted my entire project into an entirely new dimension. And ideas suddenly rushed in from everywhere.

Sedgwick, with ruminations on how the fat body can be stigmatized through discursive processes similar to the ones applied to other bodies offensive, for various reasons, to modern capitalism, effectively expands our understanding of endless aspects of the processes of coming out of the closet, by suggesting that "there *is* such a process as *coming out as a fat woman*" (italics not mine), which, similarly to the coming out as a gay person, demands bravery and taking great risk in the face of shame. More importantly, Sedgwick argues for a particular way of interpreting the process of coming out as "a way of staking one's claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of *the representational contract* between one's body and one's world (italics not mine)."[35]

Thinking through Sedgwick's and Moon's playful, yet incisive dialogue on understanding the points of contact between gay and fat bodies in twentieth-century American culture, I also realize that I am actually performing a much deeper glamor fit, or dimensions of it – the one that can be linked to Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," which is, in Berlant's words, "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility."[36] In my case, cruel optimism is developing an intricate mesh of

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[34] Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions Of Feminist Ethnography*, 1st Edition (Minneapolis: Univ. Of Minnesota Press, 1994): 100.
[35] Moon and Sedgwick, *Divinity*, 27.
[36] 1. Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 20–36: 21.

desire-and-anxiety- "plateaus"[37] around educational and academic institutions in my life. I trust that said institutions will provide and sustain me, yet at the same time experience profound confusion, disappointment, and collapse when the academy becomes the very source of disillusionment for not fulfilling whatever aspirations I have never truly thought through, but rather invested (from Lat., lit. clad!) with endless desires and fantasies structured around particular objects that to me shone, or shimmered (like Kathleen Stewart's *ordinary affects* as "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences").[38]

A perhaps even "deeper" dimension of my glamor fit is based on my fear of being or becoming "a cul-de-sac or clot in the circulation of economic value," to borrow Sedgwick's words, and, I should also add, of other systems such as social institutions and so on, that are imagined as consisting of healthy bodies, which mine, I have often feared, is not. Because of my impending gayness, I find safe space in the educational environment as the only benign space outside the safe space of home because other areas of life seem too daunting, with their murky horizons of a certain exposure to shame, or are even impossible to imagine (e.g., doing army service or getting married!).

I did not expect or plan this part of my dissertation. Rather, it naturally coalesced around my understanding of Sedgwick's interpretation of Divine's glamor fits, as well as

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[37] By "plateau" I understand "any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome." Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. 1St Edition edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

[38] Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2007: 1-2.

her definition of coming out as a type of representational contract struck between the body of the person who is outing herself/himself/trans-self, and the world. If I interpret tirunangai writings, which are supposedly the object of my scholarly enquiry, as representational contracts too, struck with the world because of the abjection-dejection complex (as catalysts for performative action), then I need to share my vulnerability in a performative way as well, in order to castrate, so to speak, my phallic signifier, to borrow Lacan's language. I need to be creative again.

While it is too late to completely alter my dissertation, I have chosen to address some issues surrounding ethnographic representation by suggesting which kinds of interventions I would include in another iteration of this study (a published book, for example). My idea is that right here in the Introduction, as well as before each chapter I perform a series of female identities that I realized I have embodied and lived over the years, which I have not, until now, harmonized with the idea of myself as the kind of gay man that I thought I was, and which in many different ways illustrate my gay transphobia, my concerns around class and citizenship, and other similar contemporary identities, as well as other feelings and desires considered excessive, bizarre, or any other way offending to members of my social and cultural world, in its manifold formal and intimate aspects.

I give female names to these identities; in some cases, they are inspired by real female persons or objects (language is gendered too), and sometimes they are my own inventions. However, no person is herself, and always a reflection of Nikola's (or Niko's, as I will explain later) fixations on particular objects of desire. Some identities could be singular and some dual because I either fabricated them with others, or developed them

thinking of another person. Their contours are not clear always and they shift – at times spasmodically, more often fluently – into other forms and other voices. Also, I could map them partially onto temporal and spatial areas of my life that are related to my research project in its various phases, or me in different moments that I am aware of being particularly polarized by my attraction to things academic for the aforementioned reasons. For the time being, an illustration of such writing can be seen at the beginning of the following chapter, ("Wayfaring to Koovagam"), in which I use a tarot card to out my beliefs unbecoming of a scholar bred on western epistemology.

In thinking and writing these characters, I have been inspired by the novel *My Name Is Red* by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, whose narrators are not only people, but also various other things and animals that inhabit the world of Ottoman Turkish miniature painting, scandalized or excited by murders spurred by iconoclastic *representations* of reality through change in graphic perspective (from medieval to linear). Fernando Pessoa – the great Portuguese poet, whose imaginary identity shattering into various "heteronyms" co-augured with many other voices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a kind of fragmented modern personhood – is a tremendous influence, as well: as a bohemian erudite (perhaps magnetizing for me a number of affects around my own desires and insecurities), cosmopolitan, anglophile and polyglot, oscillating between genteel pedanticism and irreverent mysticism.

Pessoa, famously, not only used different registers of language to differentiate these personalities, but he also created whole biographies for them; this included not only their names, but also such minute details as style of dress, eating habits, and astrological

interpretations of their birth charts (fascination with mysticism and occult will feature prominently in some of my identities too). Pessoa in Portuguese can mean either 'person' or 'nobody,' of which Fernando Pessoa was very much aware.

Nikola, from Greek, can mean either 'victory [Nike] of people [laos]' or victorious among people (I suppose whether it's read as *tatpuruṣa* or *karmadhāraya*). Nino, my familial nickname, magnetizes a certain set of identities related to my childhood, family and friends. Nino in Spanish means 'boy, child.' Niko, my grandfather's nickname, means 'nobody, no one, lit. no-who' in what immigrants from former Yugoslavia call 'our language.' Like the captain's name in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*: Nemo. I choose Niko to stand for a particular configuration of "my" identities at the time or times alluded to in the narratives. I like that this cluster of polarized identities carries the name Niko, meaning 'no one,' because thus I also acknowledge the ever-changing nature of all our identities, which are, as some philosophical and religious traditions (such as Buddhism) suggest, in their essence narrative.[39]

This Niko is being discussed, or, more aptly put, being *read* or *thrown shade*– to borrow drag slang, constantly outed and shamed by various female personae that aggregate (to use language from Buddhist phenomenology to refer to *skandhas* – bulks of *dharmas*

[39] This idea is also inspired by Kathleen Stewart's "she:" "I call myself "she" to mark the difference between this writerly identity and the kind of subject that arises as a daydream of simple presence. "She" is not so much a subject position or an agent in hot pursuit of something definitive as a point of contact; instead, she gazes, imagines, senses, takes on, performs, and asserts not a flat and finished truth but some possibilities (and threats) that have come into view in the effort to become attuned to what a particular scene might offer" (Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2007: 5).

constituting a person's experience of reality) around Niko's desires or fears (in Tarot, the ninth position in the Celtic Cross spread, the one just before the outcome, refers to the querent's hopes and fears, which I always found so confounding). In other words, these personae **out** Niko in his various aspirations to join modern capitalist society and thus reveal his cruel optimism, to borrow Berlant's perspicacious phrase.

At the "periphery" of my thinking about this whole project is also Marina Abramovic whose performance piece *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* (1988) – in which she and her lover and performance collaborator Ulay walk from the opposite ends of the Great Wall of China to meet somewhere in the middle of it to end, and honor!, their twelve-year relationship – greatly influenced me in thinking about ways of performing everyday identities in order to destabilize their attachment to us and ours to them.

With Bjork's album *Vulnicura* (2015), Paley's *Sita*, and Pina Bausch's repetitive choreographing (how to do it in writing so that it is not excruciatingly boring?) of painful mutability of human relationships in *Café Muller* – and many other works of art or anything really that caught my attention because it spoke about the loss of a person we love, while living my own heartbreak – this piece by Abramovic united me in sorrow with others. Apparently, much could be said about these *female* role models (and many others in my life) and in what relationship they exist with my identities. They also make me think if there is such a thing as a breakup dissertation, in the way that Bjork's and Nina Paley's creative outputs, among many other examples, are a breakup album and a breakup film respectively. Can we talk of the genre of breakup?

Breakup albums, and performative dissertation writing are very much about "getting one's groove back,"[40] the seed of which, to some extent, all self-narratives contain, including the ones under scrutiny in this dissertation. And, this is yet another thing with which I relate deeply in the tirunangai narratives – the transformative power of personal narratives, which is only possible once you have established the Sedgwickian representational contract between your-*self* and the world by "making clear to others that their cultural meanings will be, and will be heard as, assaultive and diminishing to the degree that they are not fat-[transgender-, women-, black-, gay-, poor-?, Dalit-, Gypsy-, etc.]-affirmative."[41] In other words, it is about "owning" one's story, taking over the representational reigns into your own hands, as in the example of Priya Babu's ethnography of tirunangais, or Revathi's and Living Smile Vidya's narratives of their own lives.

With the title of this dissertation, *Majestic Presence*, I try to underline this triumphant aspect of tirunangai narratives as a not-clearly understood "interface between abjection and defiance,"[42] while at the same time paying homage to Sedgwick and her insightful and loving interpretation of Divine and her "glamor fits." One need not be particularly perspicacious to see in the title playful echoes of my own glamor fits.

Abramovic urges us to do things that we are most afraid to do: not just stepping outside of our own comfort zones, but also taking on a whole new set of sensitivities and sensibilities to try out a whole new way of experiencing reality. I am inspired, and with

[40] Referring to the term popularized by Angela Bassett's romantic comedy from 1998, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*.
[41] Moon and Sedgwick, *Divinity*, 27.
[42] Ibid., 15.

performing this dissertation also empowered, to do "art made of trust, vulnerability and connection."[43] But, two very important things should preface my own experimental pieces. They are, of course, as everything here, burdened with the issues of representing others.

The first concern is that my narrative transvestism could be interpreted as just another instance of a man "being empowered by a pretense of femininity [he] can doff at will, leaving [his] underlying gender identity and privilege untouched or indeed enhanced," as Moon and Sedgwick warn against.[44] I hope that the whole performativity of this introduction depicts me as someone who has thoughtfully and mindfully considered a variety of the problems of representing others by suggesting that the authority of the represent-er should be somehow profoundly shattered or threatened in his or her supposed authority to speak for others.

By doing so, I also suggest, we have a potential for opening an avenue – no, avenues are linear and boring! – a potential for creating much more complex, rhizomatic and organic, "systems" in which all members are constantly creating and being created, and thus much more attuned to the potential of being surprised and transformed through sharing stories. I am thus championing a sort of more engaged scholarship in which the border between researcher and object of research, encircled by the academic community as the public, becomes much less definable, based in the mutual understanding that we are all, in

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[43] Abramović, Marina. "Transcript of 'An Art Made of Trust, Vulnerability and Connection.'" Accessed May 25, 2016. https://www.ted.com/talks/marina_abramovic_an_art_made_of_trust_vulnerability_and_connection/transcript. For the video see: https://www.ted.com/talks/marina_abramovic_an_art_made_of_trust_vulnerability_and_connection?language=en#t-532297

[44] Moon and Sedgwick, *Divinity*, 16.

one way or another, victims of "cruel optimism," or, I will dare say, victims of interpreted reality (thus Rilke's quote after the title – in which I take *distinguishing* as interpreting, as elsewhere in the poem indicated).

The second concern is that my attempt to share my stories of vulnerability and loss with tirunangais could be interpreted to suggest that I am somehow identifying this with the real embodied experience of being marginalized on all levels of power distribution as Tamil tirunangais. In the aforementioned talk by Marina Abramovic, a veritable "Performance Art 101," Abramovic makes a distinction between theater and her uniquely twentieth-century art form, performance art: "In the theater, the knife is not a knife and the blood is just ketchup. In the performance, the blood is the material, and the razor blade or knife is the tool."[45] My experimental writing is, of course, like theater in the sense that is staged and controlled, but also, I suggest, just like theater, it has the potential to move and engage both the writer and the reading audience in a more substantial way.

In my performative urge toward an ethnography of *em*pathy I propose a move from *sym*pathetic to *em*pathetic engagement with the world. As a friend noted, I somewhat incorrectly used 'sympathetic' to mean 'empathetic' in a piece of writing that I very recently emailed her to read. By this she pointed to the fact that in modern American usage 'sympathy' has connotations of pity, rather than empathy, and that, unlike 'compassion' or 'empathy,' it has a voyeuristic dimension, perhaps like the one exemplified in Facebook "culture," where all members are constantly urged to pay attention to some important

[45] See fn. 6.

causes, to be attentive to suffering of humans and non-humans in third-world or underprivileged places, etc., yet where the real engagement among the sufferers rarely occurs, and in the end becomes reduced to pity.

By italicizing the prefixes in the three words above I also play with the fact they all share the root of the same word, through Old French, from Latin *pati*[46] which means 'to suffer.' The prefixes *sym*- and *com*- both suggest togetherness or *with*-ness, and it seems to be a matter of random chance, that we do not have words such as 'sympassion,' and 'compathetic.' Empathy, on the other hand has a more recent usage in the English language having been translated from German *Einfühlung* (from *ein* "in" + *Fühlung* "feeling"), coined in 1858 by German philosopher Rudolf Lotze as a translation of Greek *empatheia* "passion, state of emotion," from assimilated form of *en* "in" + *pathos* "feeling." It is the same 'em-' as in *em*bodiment and *em*powerment, which suggests being *in* the feeling with someone and not just *with* someone and their suffering.

What I am proposing here is of course nothing new. I am, in a way, following propositions by other queer scholars like Anne Cvetkovich whose *Archive of Feelings* was hugely influential in the beginning of this project, offering a unique perspective on how to think about community identity formation and queer public culture by considering centrality of trauma in the lives of gay people. Cvetkovich, in *Archive of Feelings*, argues for the importance of distinguishing between the forms of trauma that belong to the realm of everyday from the ones experienced by larger social bodies (e.g., slavery, war,

[46] See "compassion, n.". OED Online. March 2016. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/37475?rskey=FmOTKJ&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed May 26, 2016).

genocide). By rejecting rigid distinctions between private and public trauma, Cvetkovich identifies a category of "insidious trauma" that, while overlooked in psychiatric and psychoanalytic studies, operates nonetheless and especially on oppressed populations. She studies a range of cultural texts (novels, poems, essays, video and film productions, and performance art) authored by lesbians, which provide evidence of trauma. Queer artistic output, or the "archive of feelings" as she calls it, is thus not only a support for studying the traumatic history of an oppressed group; it is also the collective evidence of a proactive response to that history.

Cvetkovich also inspires me with her Publics Feeling project, which "takes up *depression* as a keyword in order to describe the affective dimensions of ordinary life in the present moment."[47] Especially inspiring is the fact that she inspects it from her own, depression-experienced, point of view while also revealing insecurities about herself as a scholar.

In thinking about therapeutic and didactic dimensions of performing in reaction to shaming or traumatic experiences, I have also been impressed by contemporary *female* American stand-up comedians whose performative approaches to address their own issues of shame or suffering, especially shame related to various failures to embody society's ideas of perfect modern womanhood, impressed me tremendously in the past couple of years and inspired me to think more about how to mindfully laugh at the insecurities I

[47] Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2012: 12.

sometimes have about my body, sexuality, or anything that presents itself as a source of anxiety.[48]

In the ethnography of empathy that I am *proposing* here (that is why 'toward' in the title), I want to play with the idea of authorship as being much more fluid, and therefore I suggest, as an experiment, that one or a group of the aforementioned personae state the arguments of my dissertation.

I have thought a lot about which female persona should come to life and I believe that the best illustration of some of the themes in the introduction would be expressed by a collective motherly figure that would invoke various aspects of my own mother, but also other people, and even animals, objects and abstract concepts, such as words, to which I have given over the course of my life motherly attributes. I am not sure yet how this would work. Some ideas: 1. The argument is stated in a series of dialogues between Niko and this cumulative persona; 2. Perhaps Niko is not there at all and just mother-figures discussing me; 3. Niko and his former partner (whose American name means 'mother' in Croatian, which no one from the Balkans fails to see), talking out their failed relationship; etc.

This approach would mimic the story-within-story framing of Indian storytelling, as in *Mahabharata* and other epics discussed in this dissertation. Thus, it would also

[48] Amy Schumer especially catches my attention with her stand-up pieces on catching herself thinking that she could perhaps be gorgeous, or her amazing episode-long parody of *12 Angry Men* in which Amy stands in front of male jurors (all big TV stars) who are debating whether she is "hot enough to be on TV." Tig Notaro's stand-up piece *Live* is an inspiration as a rollercoaster of emotions for herself and her audiences whom she makes both laugh and cry, as she tells the story of her *annus horribilis*, in which she lost her mother, partner, and got diagnosed with cancer. Comedian Louis CK commented it this way: "I can't really describe it but I was crying and laughing and listening like never in my life. Here was this small woman standing alone against death and simply reporting where her mind had been and what had happened and employing her gorgeously acute standup voice to her own death."
https://louisck.net/news/about-tig-notaro; a link to her piece is also available there.

perhaps mimic our own narrative workings of the mind (which can also be imagined as a story—above/across/interspersed-with/tinged-with/inspired-by—story type of framing, or in endless possible ways that a story can move, or allow to be moved, to its next often unimagined state). Mother – because mothers (or I could not think of a better example) are for all of us our first experience of any kind of embodiment; especially in the early phase of life perhaps not even differentiated from our own which we do not really have if we understand gender, as other identities, discursively constructed, and thus for men their mothers are the perfect embodiment of their transgender selves. This, I believe, is even more so for gay men.

Having other motherly figures as narrators, would also reflect, compassionately I hope, the passionate urge or necessity of tirunangais and other South Asian transgender women to search for mothers in other women, having been deserted by their own families. Revathi, Smiley, and Priya Babu have all been adopted by senior transgender women as their *chelas*, transgender daughter.

Also, I believe that a mother-figure is a mind-construct most easily accessible to most people to understand how our own self, or whatever we think our self is, relates to other objects in the world that we somehow interpret as gendered, in this case as female (or maybe motherly?) gender. This type of thinking can encourage other people to think through what her or his or their mother and her (mother's) woman-ness mean when they

try to understand more abstract concepts like nation, country, language, race, ethnicity, in reference to which we have gender attitudes.[49]

For example, in Tamil number nine (*oṉpatu* – pronounced *ombadu*, or *ombodu*) is often used as an insult when speaking derogatorily about transgender women. Smiley and Revathi offer us fascinating glimpses in their autobiographic accounts of how a seemingly innocent word for a number can take on threatening and oppressive connotations in the lives of transgender women in South India. I can offer another example from my own life; in Croatia, the most common insult for a gay man is *peder*. I had been called this name before I even knew what it meant: "Mommy, mommy, what does *peder* mean?" That this word still has a very strong grip over me is evident in situations in which street names like Pederson Ln, for example, can cause visceral reactions in my body, like the butterfly sensation. The butterflies of gay oppression.

I would like to explore various ways that I personally relate to other genders through analyzing various types of my attachments to particular objects. I wonder, for example, about our relationship to objects that are not necessarily considered particularly gendered, but which in certain situations become the very definition of gender divides. For example, let us think about a towel. It is a piece of fabric, these days usually made of cotton, used to remove or absorb excess liquid from our bodies, hair, and so on. For this purpose,

[49] The work of Sumathi Ramaswamy immediately comes to mind when I think of scholarship on the connections between gender and concepts such as nation, language and so on. See Ramaswamy, Sumathi. "Maps and Mother Goddesses in Modern India." *Imago Mundi* 53, no. 1 (January 2001): 97–114; Ramaswamy, Sumathi. "En/gendering Language: The Poetics of Tamil Identity." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 4 (June 3, 2009): 683–725; Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Her methodology, however, does not have this self-inspecting dimension.

most people do not make a big distinction between female and male towels. However, a towel can be worn on the head like a turban, wrapped coyly around the chest, softly cocooned around the thighs, but it can also be worn on the shoulder (Tamil men), wielded wet and used as an instrument of violence, and seduce with its lingering smell of someone's cologne. How do we react *genderly* through touching or wearying or smelling (and so on) any particular object (sight, sound)?

I would like to write a piece which would, for example, start with an image of a towel through which I could link Revathi's, Smiley's and Priya's narrative instances where they talk about the childhood play of wearing a towel on their head pretending to be an adult woman with her hair up (and they all do in their narratives), with my own narrative vignettes in which I introspectively consider my attachment to a towel or other objects (shawl, fountain pens, cigarettes, Kingfisher beer bottles, etc.) that reveal how gender, and other mind constructs such as class, race, etc., congeal from a mass of sensory input in my mind. In this way, I claim, I have a better way of understanding how any other type of embodiment works, than just experiencing an object by being in physical and temporal proximity with it.

This type of methodology should perhaps be based on self-observant participation, to stretch the new reformulations of the classical ethnographic method,[50] the one which requires an honest investigation of our own *vested* interests, a fearless exploration of our

[50] See Moeran, Brian. "From Participant Observation to Observant Participation." In *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life*, by Sierk Ybema, Dvora Yanow, Harry Wels, and Frans Kamsteeg, 139–55. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009.

desires and fears, in order to understand *how* our various closets exist so that we can define them, primarily to ourselves and then to others (the contract), and thus loosen its influence on us. Narratively defining and describing these closets, is what coming out is, what owning one's story is. This would not only push our scholarship to now unimagined territories, but it would also make us happier, wiser, and even healthier scholars.

Yes, the ethnography of empathy ultimately precludes an ethnography of the ethnographer's self. This is, to an extent, an answer to a possible critique that with this methodological approach my object of study here is in fact my own self and thus biased. I claim, however, that this is perhaps the least biased approach because if you as a researcher and scholar, or just a human being, cannot understand on a much deeper level of self-inquiry, how your various identities are formed and in relationship to what, than how are you going to "understand" the same processes in somebody else? Or, as RuPaul, more effectively, says it, "if you can't love yourself, how the hell you gonna love somebody else?"

Chapter 1: *Wayfaring* to[51] Koovagam: Embodied Stories, Traveling Places

"The deity of the Tamil shrine is nearly always revealed, we might say born – in violence."
-- David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*[52]

If I'm a pagan of the good times
My lover's the sunlight
To keep the Goddess on my side
She demands a sacrifice

-- Hozier, *Take Me to Church*[53]

ABSTRACT

In this chapter I engage with the myths (stories) and their mutability and potential for all-inclusivity in order to understand how the myth of Aravāṉ's wedding to transgendered Krishna became one of the most defining ones in the 1990s, and most instrumental in bringing together disparate transgender individuals and groups of transgender women. By doing so, I explore older dimensions of *Tamiḻakam*, which I define as the Tamil public sphere, by borrowing the indigenous Tamil term, first used to refer to the "traditional

[51] This preposition could be exchanged with any other to indicate endless ways we can interact with a place, either imagined or real.

[52] David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1980): 108.

[53] Hozier is a young singer-songwriter whose song *Take Me to Church* became a big success on the charts around the world in 2015. I could not but notice this particular reference in the lyrics to the goddess and the sacrifice that she demands, almost as if a price for a new identity. The violence, trauma, and rupture with the old self, mandatory experiences on the path toward new identities, are perhaps aspects of the sacrifice needed for this transformation into a deity, divinity, Divine!

domain of the three royal dynasties of the Chola, Chera, and Pandya,"[54] and then in the twentieth century to underline nationalist Tamil ideologies that develop, as in many other places in India, in tandem with various colonial interpretations of this region. I engage with *how* (because, this is, in many respects, the study of *how* identities happen, not which ones) myths and stories of significant places in the South Indian geographical places became tied into the language and stories of the people who inhabit them. For this reason, I play with the concept of *pāṭalpeṟṟa*/*pukaḻpeṟṟa iṭam* (lit. place that has received a song, praise) to consider how singing/telling stories can be used to create cultural, spatial and other identities. Special attention is given to understanding how epic stories have been appropriated by various groups in Tamil and other South Asian territories.

The role of Devī, a name subsuming various manifestations of Hindu goddesses, is also explored here, especially as a catalysts and model for transgender metamorphoses. Further, I detail how tirunangais have engaged with the Aravan myth in the past twenty or so years, as well as speculate why it has been so tremendously useful in producing a whole new set of culturally viable identities. At the end I also question the centrality of Kūvākam/Koovagam (a small village close to Pondicherry in Tamil Nadu, the most famous place of Aravan worship) in the tirunangai narratives themselves, which, as I claim in my dissertation, are representational contracts that tirunangais articulate in relation to themselves and Tamiḻakam, as a way of coming out of the Tamil epistemological closets. By using Sedgwick's concept of the "periperformative" in reference to J. L. Austin's work

[54] Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004: 107.

on performative utterances, I suggest we read tirunangais' annual re-enactment of the Aravan myth as a form of autobiography.

SUGGESTED PERFORMATIVE PIECE

Before I conform to the formal register required of the dissertation genre, I insert an experimental piece of writing to illustrate some of the ideas I developed in the introductory essay. It starts with three predictions "given" to Niko, followed by a tarot card (Nine of Disks) outing Niko.

Many years ago, Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1980) greatly stirred me because I recognized myself in the heroine of the novel who feels unable to shake off fatalistic thoughts caused by a prediction of a great tragedy awaiting her in her adult life, which was cast upon her birth by a family astrologer.[55] The meeting with the above astrologer indeed happened in 2001 when an acquaintance of mine, a reputed linguist with a job at a Paris institute, took me to his family astrologer on the outskirts of Pondicherry, a former French colonial town, now union territory within the state of Tamil Nadu in India. I have often thought about the astrologer's prognosis to the point that I cannot even remember any other detail about the visit to his house. I wonder here about the power of stories we tell ourselves, or that others tell and we somehow embody. I also use an astrological reference because the zodiac system, in its various incarnations, has been one of the most influential and persistent epistemological systems in my life.

[55] Desai, Anita. Cry, the Peacock. Orient Paperbacks, 1980.

I am using a tarot card persona to reveal some of my own belief structures which evidently do not correspond to the idea of a rational western scholar. This persona outs superstitious aspects of my identity so that I can engage in analyzing my own belief structures which, I realize, are much less identifiable than I thought they were. This is an important revelation for me because I set out to explore various identities of Tamil transgender women and I do not even know what mine are! In fact, it is not that I do not know what they are, but I am afraid that I might out myself as someone who is potentially understood (or felt)[56] as shame-attracting by the people whose opinion of me matters. For example, it is evident from below that Niko's belief systems are completely suffused with what is often depicted in our culture as mysticism and occultism. I also choose a tarot card here because I understand tarot as a story book itself, in which the hero travels through various embodiments on his or her journey from the *Fool* to the *World* card, accentuating again my main postulation in the introductory essay that discovering oneself leads to better understanding of the others (the world).[57]

This chapter could, thus, start like this:

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[56] Shame, as Sedgwick notes, is immensely contagious: "One of the strangest features of shame--but perhaps also the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for projects like ours--is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment by someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me--assuming I'm a shame-prone person--with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable" (Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2003: 36-7).

[57] Hero certainly has elements of the archetypal trickster (as the Fool and Magician cards in Tarot suggest) which can remind one of the role of ethnographer as trickster, or, as Kamala Visweswaran underscores, that "the art of the trickster is manifestly to faire semblant, to act "as if"" (Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1994): 100).
For more thoughts on the hero's journey in tarot, as well as ideas for using tarot for therapeutic reasons see Jodorowsky, Alejandro, and Marianne Costa. *The Way of Tarot: The Spiritual Teacher in the Cards*. 1 edition. Rochester, Vt: Destiny Books, 2009.

PREDICTIONS

1. "Your career lies in writing or spices."

-- A *jōciyar* (Tamil traditional astrologer) speaking to Niko in Pondicherry, India, 2001.

2. *āṇmūlam aracāḷum; peṇmūlam nirmūlam.*

(If a man is born under the *mūlam* star, he will be king; if a woman, the star will bring utter destruction.) – Tamil proverb

3.

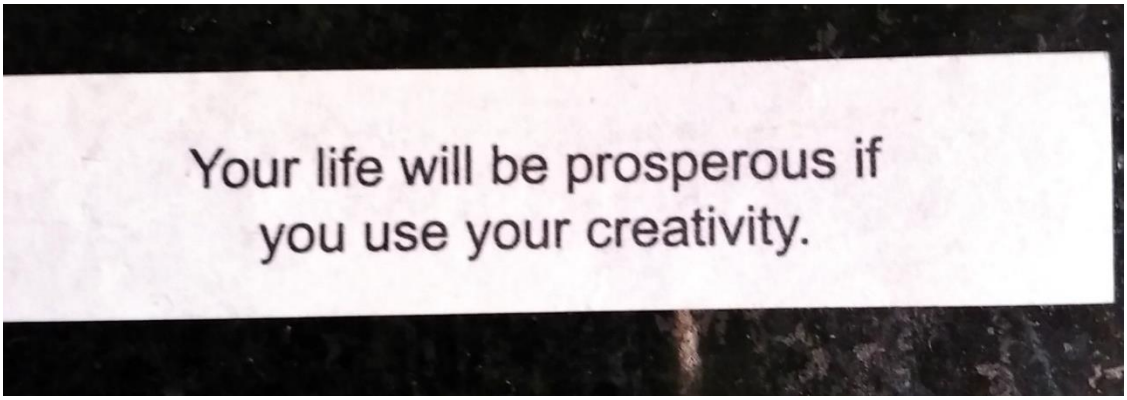

Figure 1: Fortune-cookie prediction received before I started writing my introductory chapter (Late May, 2016).[58]

[58] Image taken with my phone camera.

Figure 2: Nine of Disks (from the Rider-Waite deck, in the public domain)

My name is the Nine of Disks. I'm a tarot card, in case you find my name uncommon. Common, indeed, I am not! You probably know me as the nine of diamonds in a regular deck of playing cards. Nines are good. Everybody likes nines. And sevens. Good omens. In the regular card deck, my look is veiled by those hideous red diamonds, but in the Rider-Waite tarot deck, the one everyone knows, my true splendor comes forth! I must be a noble woman because where else would have I gotten this falcon elegantly perched on my left hand? It is hooded and it is accompanying me in a stroll through my well-maintained gardens. My robes are heavy and sumptuous. Niko thinks they are made of golden brocade like some Chinese emperor's robe that he's seen at a museum.

The time of day is late afternoon. Sfumato purples and copper ombres of the distant horizon calm my eyes, while a glare of the low-hanging sun occasionally flares under my eyelashes. The world is held by my gaze, and comforted by my regal presence. (Am I Devi, Goddess?) My castle is close by. Maybe it's the one in the picture left off the falcon. Niko imagines it as a secluded, safe and self-sufficient homestead lacking in nothing, just as the bountiful grapes in my garden suggest. I am alone here but not lonely. I have suffered but Niko doesn't know exactly what happened; what matters is that I have succeeded in life despite everything and I am here in my garden to enjoy the material rewards that my rich and eventful life has blessed me with.

Niko is comforted if he sees me in his tarot readings. If love is troubling him (or lack thereof, in fact), and if I appear, I tell Niko that his solitude will not be pain-inducing as the ones promised by my tarot-fellows such as the Five of Cups, and Three of Swords. No, I bring Niko satisfaction that even if he is alone, he can be fabulous: Divine! The goddess

needs no one but herself. If penury troubles Niko, I tell him that he has nothing to fear, that I am there to protect him with my terraced and walled gardens and a house that no path leads to.

"Do mene nema pu-ta, do mene nema pu-ta…,"[59] *Niko and I sing together.*

THE STORY OF ARAVĀṆ

Following my argument that tirunangais cannot exist in society without owning their stories,[60] which happens only through first-person narration (of which Revathi's, Living Smile Vidya's and Priya Babu's publications are the first of its kind in India), in this chapter I look at the story of Aravāṉ, a Tamil village deity whose myth and annual festival first attracted transgender women in the 1980s, and, later in the 1990s, the gaze of the Tamil public with their fascination with tirunangais' annual ritual embodiment of the Aravan myth.

The most famous place associated with the worship of Aravan is a small village of Koovagam. Before I describe the actual Aravan festival and its ritual proceedings, I want to briefly discuss the relationship between locality and notions of the sacred in Tamil tradition. What is important for my study here, is to consider how a place can become a thing of stories itself, and thus transcend its physical confines, becoming like an aura

[59] A lyric from the song "Ena" (female name) by the 1980s Zagreb band *Haustor*, one of Niko's favorite bands.

[60] Through self-narratives which are instances of performative utterances (Austin's work and Sedgwick – "That language itself can be productive of reality is a primary ground of antiessentialist inquiry").

permeating an actual place that can diffuse and be taken with the pilgrims who immerse themselves in this mythological pool.

This way of thinking is, in way, a response to anthropologist Tim Ingold's insistence to denounce 'space' as a useful category since "it pictures an isotropic surface upon which all things are wrapped up in themselves, fixed in their respective places, broken off from the movements that brought them there, and caught in a finite, closed and all-encompassing network of synchronic connections."[61] Ingold, instead, insists that we have to talk about the category 'place,' and even more importantly, about how we lead our lives in relation to it (to and from, around, through, and so on.). In Ingold's words:

> "... human existence is not fundamentally place-*bound* …. but place*binding*. It unfolds not in places but along paths. Proceeding along a path, every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other. Every entwining is a knot, and the more that lifelines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot."[62]

Ingold calls the activity of interacting with a place in all its inexhaustible combinations *wayfaring*, and I think it is perfectly suitable to describe tirunangais' "embodied experience of this perambulatory movement."[63] Furthermore, this way of thinking about a place is very much in accordance with quite a few scholars who have worked on pilgrimage and sacred localities in South Asia and who have demonstrated that places exist at the same time in many different registers, and that a place does not even

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[61] Ingold, Tim. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London; New York: Routledge, 2011: 141-2.
[62] Ibid., 148.
[63] Ibid.

have to be real to exert extreme influence upon people.[64] A good example of it would be the well-known case of Ayodhya, a city in northern India, where in 1992 a mob of Hindu right-wing nationalists dismantled the sixteenth century Babri Masjid mosque which supposedly had been built on *Ram janmabhoomi*, the birthplace of the Hindu god Rāma.[65] Another, more southern, example would be so-called Adam's ridge, a series of small islands in between the mainland of India and Sri Lanka, which for many Hindus is the remains of the bridge built by monkeys in the epic *Rāmāyāṇa*.

The origin of place worshipping in the Dravidian south predates the notions of the sacred expressed in the oldest literature composed in Sanskrit, the *Vedas*. The divine for the ancient Tamilian was not something otherworldly (like in the Aryan, Vedic religion, which had by the beginning of the new millennium already left a mark on Tamil culture, as evident from the ancient Tamil literature, also known as *caṅkam*/*sangam* literature), but rather something more mundane that can be found in particular places, objects or even people.[66] Such beliefs found their most visible form in the hero-stone worshipping. The hero-stones can be found all over Tamil land and most often represent kings who died in a valiant battle (the place of uncontrolled flow of sacred energy) or chaste wives.[67]

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64 See, for example, Eck, Diana L. *Banaras*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998; Eck, Diana L. *India: A Sacred Geography*. Reprint edition. Harmony, 2013; Haberman, David L. *Journey through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna*. 1 edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

65 Sharma, Ram Sharan. "The Ayodhya Issue." In *Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property*, edited by R. Layton, P. Stone, and J. Thomas. Routledge, 2003: 127-139.

66 Hart, George L. *Poems of Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and Their Sanskrit Counterparts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975: 63.

67 Ibid. See also Thirunavukkarasu, K.D. "Pattini Cult." In *Papers on Tamil Studies*, edited by S. V. Subramanian and V. Murugan, 1st ed. Publication (International Institute of Tamil Studies), no. 28. Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1980: 62.

Martha Selby describes a *sangam* poem as "the place where environment and body meet,"[68] and many know the entire literature for its unique poetics, as prescribed by the oldest Tamil grammatical treatise the *Tolkāppiyam* (1st-6th centuries CE).[69] The world of poetic imagination is divided into *akam* and *puṟam*, both spatial categories. *Akam* means "interior, inner parts, heart, household"[70] and as such represents the opposite of *puṟam*. The poems in the *akam* mode are mostly love poems with dramatis personae, types rather than actual persons, the most common of them being: heroine, hero, heroine's female friend, hero's male friend, and heroine's mother or foster-mother.

Akam poetry is further subdivided, according to the *Tolkāppiyam*, into a complex and refined system of seven *tinais*, which were famously translated by A. K. Ramanujan as *interior landscapes*.[71] Selby, finding the current understanding of the *tinai* as 'landscape' and 'poetic situation' to be limited in scope and boundary, and suggests to see it as a *context*, because this word is "sweeping, and includes geographical space, time, and everything that grows, develops, and lives within that space and time, including emotion."[72]

Puṟam means "exterior, public, outer parts", and the poems of this division deal with the public life that centers on the king. These poems are often eulogies to the king's

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[68] Martha Ann Selby, "Dialogues of Space, Desire, and Gender in Tamil Cankam Poetry," in *Tamil Geographies: Cultural Constructions of Space and Place in South India*, ed. Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Martha Ann Selby (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 17–43: 29.
[69] Ibid., 18-19.
[70] According to the *Tamil Lexicon* (http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/tamil/index.html).
[71] See Ramanujan, A. K., trans. *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology*. Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1994.
[72] Selby, "Dialogues of Space," 25.

bravery and might, his war exploits and the sacred character he embodies in Tamil culture. The king's importance cannot be overestimated, and bards never tire of praising his greatness. A particular genre of *puṟam* style poems should be mentioned here, namely *āṟṟuppatai*, in which one bard praises the generosity of their patron ruler and explains in detail to another bard how to reach the patron and his court. In the late phase of this genre, as exemplified by the poem *Tirumurukāṟṟuppatai* (6th c. CE), the roles of the two bards are taken by an initiate in Murukaṉ's (Murugan) cult and a neophyte; the god is praised as a patron-king would be in other poems of this genre, but the gift he offers his devotees is personal salvation instead of the food and wealth kings usually gave to bards who sought their patronage.

Indeed, bhakti saints map the Tamil land by composing hymns to gods residing in their sacred loci.[73] These gods are inextricably linked to certain geographical places and thus perceived as different "persons" by their devotees, although nominally belonging to Vaishnava or Shaiva classifications. Devotees have their *ishtadeva*, desired or chosen deity. For example, Āntāl (Andal), a ninth-century Tamil devotional female poet, chose god Rankanāta at Śrīrangam as her object of devotion. In Andal's composition *Nācciyārtirumoḻi*, apart from celebrating Rankanāta, she also celebrates Vishnu as the ruler of Māliruñcōlai (modern-day Alagarkoil near Madurai), Vēnkateśvara of the Vēnkata hill or Tirupati, and also as the cowherd lord (Krishna) residing in Kutantai (modern

[73] These sacred places are thus known in Tamil as *pātalpeṟṟa patikal*, 'the places which received a song.'

Kumbakonam).[74] I will further discuss Tamil bhakti literature as the "poetry of experience"[75] in chapter 4, which discusses the literary dimensions of *Tamiḻakam*.

In short, as many scholars have noticed, Tamil people inscribe the divine in their immediate environment, and more specifically into specific geographic loci that later become marked by temples, and that are believed to be places charged with great power that can influence the devotees. The relationship that Tamil people can have with their deities can be very intimate; for example, gods are often imagined as children and lovers (god Krishna, or Kaṇṇaṉ, as he is known in Tamil, is a perfect example of both). While this is also the case in other parts of India where Krishna worship is prominent, no other Indian literary tradition has anything resembling the *piḷḷaitamiḻ* genre of Tamil literature in which various, Hindu and non-Hindu, gods are imagined as small children.[76] The relationship that devotees can have with Tamil deities can also be very fierce and violent, especially evident in bhakti poems to Shiva.[77] The devotion of the Aravan worship, as we shall see, is not the bhakti of Krishna erotic love, but rather the bhakti of blind and fierce devotion so typical of the Tamil village. It is a religious tradition in which the most persistent myth is the one of tension between the Goddess in her numerous forms, and Shiva, who is either slain by her, or married to her once the slaying of the god became

[74] See Āṇṭāḷ. *The Secret Garland: Āṇṭāls Tiruppāvai and Nācciyār Tirumoli*. Translated by Archana Venkatesan. Oxford University Press, 2010.
[75] Cutler, Norman. *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
[76] See Richman, Paula. *Extraordinary Child: Poems from a South Indian Devotional Genre*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.
[77] See Richman, Paula. *Extraordinary Child: Poems from a South Indian Devotional Genre*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

unacceptable in the increasingly brahmanized temple religious activity.[78] In the Aravan myth we find this myth fragmented in various ways.

THE CULT OF ARAVAN

Aravan, locally also known as Kūttāṇṭavar (Kuttandavar), is worshipped as a deity in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu with the greatest concentration of his temples in the former North and South Arcot districts (nowadays broken into Tiruvannamalai and Vellore, and Cuddalore and Villupuram districts respectively). There are numerous variations of the Aravan myth and here I offer the simplified version of one of the most often cited in the local legends and Tamil variants of the Bharata epic as collected by Alf Hiltebeitel, a widely-known scholar of Indian epic traditions, especially the *Mahabharata* epic.[79] A similar version of this myth is told by Priya Babu in her ethnography of the tirunangai community.[80]

As the war between two sets of patrilineal cousins Pandavas and Kauravas begins, Aravan, the son of the Pandava hero Arjuna and a female *nāga* (mythical snake-like beings found as objects of worship, as well as art and literature throughout the Indian peninsula) Ulupī, is recommended as the ideal victim for the *kaḷappali* (battlefield sacrifice). Aravan

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[78] Shulman, David Dean. *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1980.

[79] Alf Hiltebeitel, "Dying Before the Mahabharata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-Building for Aravan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 447–73, 452.

[80] Priya Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ, camūka varaiviyal* (Chennai: Tenticai, 2007): 87-98.

eagerly accepts but he requests three boons from Krishna, both an incarnation of god Vishnu and Pandava's ally, who orchestrates his *kaḷappali*: to die a hero's death on the battlefield, to be able to watch the entire battle, and to allow his head to be able to watch the battle until its end.

In a variant of the myth, previously known only in the former South Arcot area (Cuddalore and Vilupuram districts nowadays), Aravan requests, as his third boon, to get married before he dies. Since no woman wishes to marry a warrior who is surely to die in the battle, Krishna assumes the form of an enchanting celestial nymph Mohini who then marries Aravan and consummates her marriage with him. The following day Aravan sacrifices himself on the battlefield and Mohini laments the death of her husband. This version becomes central in the ritual doings of the Koovagam festival and is especially relevant for the tirunangai participants. Because of the popularity of the Koovagam festival, the latter version has become the most commonly known one, especially in parts of Tamil Nadu (and elsewhere in India) where this previously small cult had been previously unknown

The Koovagam Aravan festival is an eighteen-day annual affair during which the aforesaid myth of Aravan is ritually re-enacted. Hiltebeitel considers the cult pervaded by "the enormity of death… condensed into the reiterated deaths and revivals of this one hero [Aravan}, and expressed metaphorically through mythic and ritual forms of body-building – involving icons, effigies, and persons – that construct, transform, dismantle, and reconstruct bodies and heads." This "reconstruction of bodies" is also relevant for explaining the appeal to some transgender people of the area because it also subsumes

transvestic practices that have been an inherent part of the cult. The example of this is the wedding ceremony of Aravan and Mohini celebrated on the fifteenth day of the festival, during which male villagers used to assume the role of Krishna as a bride and get ritually married to Aravan.

It is evident that tirunangais accentuate the ritual of divine marriage from among other elements of the festival because they actively participate only in the last three days of the festival when Aravan is married and sacrificed. Usually on the fifteenth day of the festival, tirunangais start arriving at the Koovagam village situated in the Villupuram district southwest of Chennai from various parts of Tamil Nadu and India. The first night they arrive in Koovagam, tirunangais dress in their wedding saris, adorn their hair with jasmine, put on jewelry, wedding bangles and other bridal paraphernalia. Then, they proceed to the small Aravan temple where they worship Aravan as their groom while the priests, representing Aravan, perform the marriage ritual ending with the tying of the *tāli*, a thread or necklace around the neck of a married woman (also known as the *mangalasutra* in other parts of India), smeared with turmeric paste.[81]

For the rest of the night they sing and dance and some of the tirunangais engage in sexual activities in the nearby fields with local villagers and other men who visit the festival specifically for the purpose of having sex with tirunangais.[82] Throughout the night, the villagers erect a twenty-foot tall makeshift Aravan effigy and as dawn approaches, the

[81] The priests very often belong to the local *vaṉṉiyar* caste whose members were so essential in promoting the Aravan martial and self-sacrificial ideologies.

tirunangais gather around the effigy to pay homage to their husband. The effigy is placed on the temple chariot and ceremoniously circulated around the village. The actual sacrifice, that is, the death, of Aravan is not ritually enacted, but is symbolically understood with the dismantling of his body on the same night in the village goddess temple (the shrine of the goddess Kāḷi).

Before that, Aravan is taken to the "weeping ground" where the tirunangais begin the widow rituals by disheveling their hair, while the temple priests break their bangles, and cut and remove their *thalis*. Most of them then proceed to the bathing tank, put on white saris befitting their newly widowed status, and begin to head home. They are supposed to wear white for thirty days before they can again wear colored saris, bangles, *poṭṭu* (known also as *bindi* in other parts of India; a forehead dot-like decoration either painted or in the form of a sticker), and other paraphernalia worn by married women in India.

In her ethnography of Tamil funerary songs, Isabelle Clark-Deces remarks that "women from middle, lower, or untouchable castes… do not simply shed tears, but cry out well-made statements that possess a generic structure, and their weeping is tuneful. The tone and delivery style, including the beating of the breast, pulling of hair, and fainting, are so marked that, if a Tamil man uses them, he is immediately described as effeminate and mocked."[83] Clark-Deces' observation reminds me again of how our identities are not only verbally articulated but also gestured by our bodies in many different ways. Perhaps it is

[83] Isabelle Clark-Decès, No One Cries for the Dead: Tamil Dirges, Rowdy Songs, and Graveyard Petitions (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 5.

these gestures, repeated endlessly as an interchange between the tireless priests and tirunangais (tying/cutting the thali, breaking bangles), and later on the "weeping ground" as the gestures of grief for their dead husband that draw attention of the public. The plea for empathetic understanding of tirunangais' plight is, I suggest, first expressed in the repetitive gestures that everyone in Tamil Nadu understands as indicators of great pain and suffering: the beating of the breast, pulling of hair and fainting.

The participation of tirunangais at the Aravan festival in Koovagam is a relatively novel phenomenon. Their definite presence there cannot be dated earlier than the second half of the last century. The earliest account of the festival given we have is by a British colonial officer W. Francis in 1906 in which nothing is said of the presence of *alis,* as tirunangais were then known. Rather, only local male villagers donning women's clothes participated in the festival rituals.[84] Hiltebeitel's Koovagam informants told him a story of a tirunangai by the name of Devi who participated in the festival in late 1970s or the early 1908s, became a great devotee of Aravan, and spread the word to other transgender women in Tamil Nadu and other large urban centers in India.[85] Bharatikannamma, an older transgender activist that I had a chance to briefly meet in Madurai in 2013, confirmed this by saying that Madurai-based tirunangais did not participate in the festival activities in large numbers before the early 1990s.[86]

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[84] Hiltebeitel, "Dying Before the Mahabharata War:" 454.

[85] Ibid., 456.

[86] If it is hard to believe that an individual, or a small group of people can bring about such changes I would like to point to the evidence for rapid cult developments offered by Gananath Obeyesekere in his study of the fire-walking ritual at the shrine of Kataragama in southeastern Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere, Gananath. "The Fire-Walkers of Kataragama: The Rise of Bhakti Religiosity in Buddhist Sri Lanka." *The Journal of Asian Studies*

The Koovagam festival is unimaginable nowadays without tirunangais and it is also widely referred to as the Aravani festival.[87] This is most noticeable in the tirunangais' identification with the celestial nymph Mohini and her divine marriage to Aravan. Here, we can certainly distinguish the concept of bhakti as unconditional ecstatic love underlying the mythology and embodiment of Mohini.[88] In many ways she is a paragon of perfect devotion (bhakti) to her husband, and metaphorically to the divine, precisely because she sacrifices her own life to satisfy her doomed husband's wish.

Regarded as an incarnation of Krishna, Mohini is ritualistically claimed as a part of the tirunangai community because she, just as them, transitions between genders, from male to female. Capitalizing on the fact that Mohini symbolically plays a tirunangai in the myth, Tamil transgender women follow her example based on the tradition and mimic her actions. They take on the role of Mohini to validate their claim on the marriage to Aravan. As a result of this emotionally embodied performance, they start attracting the attention of the general public.

The Koovagam Panchayat[89] president N. Periyacāmi interviewed by Hiltebietel speaks about tirunangais in the following way: "In truth, the Alis are people who are full

37, no. 3 (May 1, 1978): 457–76) Obeyesekere convincingly demonstrates that the fire-walking ritual at the Skanda shrine is not older than World War II, contrary to the popular belief that the ritual is ancient and dating to the mythic times. His research shows that the ritual can be linked with certainty to a handful of South Indian Hindu pilgrims/mendicants, who started with fire-walking practices at the beginning of the twentieth century. Further, its popularity among Sri Lankan urban proletariat is owed primarily to only two men, Wijeratne Sāmi and Mutukuda Sāmi, who transformed the Hindu ritual of fire-walking into one dominated by Sinhala Buddhists.

[87] It will suffice to google "Koovagam," and most finds will immediately refer to tirunangais.

[89] *Panchayat* is a type of local self-government organization in India.

of bhakti… Even among us you cannot say we are bigger bhaktas [devotees]. And even then the bhakti they have for Aravāṉ is indescribable…"[90]Apart from the obvious demonstration of devotion through emotive outbursts, a distinctive feature of bhakti, I also see tirunangais personify another critical aspect of bhakti, which is related to its power of social change. In many different forms and in different regions of India, bhakti has questioned and subverted caste, gender and institutional norms.[91] An example of this can be the inclusion of the early Tamil bhakti hymns of *Āḻvars* (Tamil devotional poets who sang about Vishnu in his incarnation of, mostly, Krishna), some of whom were low-caste, into the scriptural canon and temple rituals of the later brahmanical sect of Śrīvaiṣṇavas.[92]

The well-founded relationship between the Koovagam cult and festival, and tirunangais is particularly observable in the very name that Tamil transgender women first chose for themselves, *aravāṉi*, before the term 'tirunangai' took over (even though both are still used interchangeably as a respectful term for Tamil transgender women). Until recently tirunangais were most commonly known in Tamil speaking areas as *alis*. The word 'ali' is quite old can be dated to such ancient texts as the classical epic *Cilappatikāram*.[93] It usually denotes a type of ambiguous quality such as in the words *alikkirakam* – neutral planet such as Mercury or Saturn, or *aliyeḻuttu* – a Tamil letter considered neither a vowel nor a consonant. It is worth noting that my informant in this terminological issue, Dr.

[90] Hiltebeitel, "Dying Before the Mahabharata War:" 457.

[91] Nammāḻvār, and A. K. Ramanujan. *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981: 139.

[92] See Hardy, Friedhelm E. *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Krsna Devotion in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983: 45.

[93] Personal communication with Dr. Bharathy from AIIS, Madurai.

Bharathy from the American Institute of Indian Studies office in Madurai, tried to assure me that the term *aravani* is not new, pointing to the fact that it simply means Aravan's wife and that it denotes Krishna in his Mohini disguise. However, we could not find any instance of its use in earlier literature in reference to transgender persons, unlike the term *ali*.

The confusion may have arisen due to the ambiguity of the qualifier 'new.' What started as a trend some thirty-forty years ago – if we are to follow Hiltebeitel's historical analysis of the tirunangais' presence in Koovagam – now can hardly be considered new, especially by everyday native speakers of the language. Until recently, no major Tamil dictionary, not even the exhaustive Tamil Lexicon, documented the word 'aravani' in relation to transgender persons. It has only been included in the second edition of the Kriya Tamil-Tamil-English Dictionary (Kriyāviṉ taṟkalat tamiḻ akarāt) in 2008. We can learn from Priya Babu's ethnography of tirunangais, discussed in its own chapter in this dissertation, about the originator of the term *aravāṉi*. A certain police superintendent Mr. Ravi suggested the use of the term, as the guest of honor at a tirunangai beauty pageant, stressing the wedding part as the explanatory factor. According to him, "[m]embers of this community once a year marry Aravāṉ as their husband and because of that we should call them aravāṉis."[94]

Before term 'tirunangai' started being used, the term 'aravani' offered a unique opportunity for transgender women of Tamil Nadu because it was for the first time in history that they chose a name for themselves. The term 'aravani' made it possible for them

[94] Babu, Priya. *Aravāṇikaḷ, camūka varaiviyal*. Chennai: Teṉticai, 2007: 15.

to eschew the tyranny of being called *ali*, *poṭṭai* or any other name tirunangais consider offensive and derogatory. I discuss the issue of trauma related to name-calling in the chapter on transgender self-narratives. It will suffice to reiterate here briefly that verbal abuse is one of the most insidious methods for undermining a person's sense of self and identity, and is a continuous source of trauma for many queer people. Words like *ali* and *poṭṭai* impart a sense of otherness, oddness, non-humanness, and estrangement, and are particularly offending and hurtful.

The symbiosis[95] between tirunangais and the Aravan festival, as well as the importance of the term aravani, is evident in the name of the official organization representing transgender persons in Tamil Nadu. The full name of the organization is Thamilnadu Aravanigal Association, whose acronym is THAA, meaning 'give,' as explained on their website.[96] It was founded in 1998 by the tirunangai Aasha Bharathi and in their own words "THAA is totally governed by Aravanis and it is BY the Aravanis, FOR the Aravanis and TO the Aravanis."[97] Aasha Bharati features as herself in *Navarasa* and thus finally the people (Aravāṉis), the name (Aravāṉi) and the Koovagam festival come together.

[95] If we talk about symbiosis I should mention the impact of the increasing numbers of visitors on the Koovagam economy, and the fact that tirunangais' participation put the otherwise small helmet on Koovagam on the map of known world.

[96] Official webpage for THAA at http://www.infosem.org/thaa.htm. THAA's 'give' – suggesting, I believe, the generosity of the tirunangai community – reminds me of Priya Babu's insistence that tirunangais are ideal Indian citizens because they are generous and of pure hearts (see chapter on Priya Babu's ethnography).

[97] Ibid.

Tirunangais were recognized as a separate gender by the Tamil Nadu state government in May, 2008, and Tamil Nadu thus became the first state in India to allow its transgender citizens to officially declare their third-gender identification. The identification documents were first issued in the form of ration cards which are the most important documents for the poor to whom the tirunangais usually belong. What they allowed transgender persons was to "allow them to avail of government welfare schemes without being forced to present themselves as males or females."[98] Aasha Bharati and her Thamilnadu Aravanigal Association were among the groups mobilizing for this change. It would be simplistic to argue that the relationship forged between tirunangais and the Koovagam annual festival has directly influenced this huge change in the judicial and governmental perception of transgender people in Tamil Nadu, but there is no reason to doubt that this positive outcome is linked to the relatively positive environment that the Tamil tirunangais created through their symbiotic relationship with the Aravan cult.

The local festival revolving around Aravan's sacrifice is only a manifestation of the complex phenomenon of the cult that has its roots in the medieval Tamil interpretation of the colossal Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*. By the word 'cult,' so often employed here, I refer rather broadly to "any particular system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies," [99] and not to the narrower sociological usage based on the understanding of cult as a religious group with socially nonstandard or deviant beliefs and

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[98] Ibid.

[99] Stark, Rodney, and William Bainbridge. *A Theory of Religion*. Reprint edition. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1996: 124.

practices. Some scholars underline the transient nature of cults since they are "based on individual concerns and experience" and highly variable "according to the stimuli of the particular group of people or to the needs of the society and in due course it gathers its local colour."[100]

The high potency for transformability and malleability of cults is very relevant for my study because transgender women have not always been part of the Koovagam festival, yet by tapping into its mythical and performative world they transformed it into a festival inextricably linked to them. In the introductory essay, I mentioned Nina Paley's film *Sita Sings the Blues* as a very modern and personal adaptation of the *Ramayana* epic. However, stories, have always been depositories of not only knowledge, as well as a source of entertainment, but also (just as language) inextricably linked to the political power system of those who owned the story in the first place. Epic stories have often been such archives of knowledge and political power in Indian history. The following section illustrates it.

EPICS AS GENERATORS OF IDENTITY AND AUTHORITY

It is essential to understand the great Indian epic as a living, fluid, and transformative/transformable entity, ever mirroring and questioning the most central concerns, problems and dilemmas of Indian people. The stories of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have been appropriated and altered numerous times in history by various groups

[100] Thirunavukkarasu, K.D. "Pattini Cult." In Papers on Tamil Studies, edited by S. V. Subramanian and V. Murugan, 1st ed. Publication (International Institute of Tamil Studies), no. 28. Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1980: 62.

and communities in order to serve their various needs and purposes. The stories of the great battle in the Bharata clan (Mahabharata) and of Rama's and Sita's ordeals (Ramayana) were first redacted by brahmans, members of the priestly caste, sometime in the middle of the first millennium CE and preserved in the Sanskrit canonical version, and later vernacularized for legitimizing regional medieval Hindu kings by symbolizing divine rule.[101]

Variants of the narrative, representing different social groups, focused on different themes and characters of the great epic at different regions and moments of time. A beautiful example of a radically distinct engagement with the epic would be Telugu women's songs inspired by the *Ramayana* epic. Unlike the Sanskrit version glorifying the exploits of the divine king Rama, which can be heard recited by the priests in temples, the women of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana rather focus on Rama's wife Sita and other female, albeit minor, characters such as Urmila. Theirs are songs belonging to the domestic, gendered space of the house, focusing on the parts of the text with domestic and other themes of interest to women. Not surprisingly, even among these women a further variation can be detected with respect to their various social positions; while both the upper- and lower-caste women sympathized much more with the plight of Sita, than with Rama, and rejoiced over her motherhood, lower-caste women's songs also reveal a mistrust with the

[101] See, Pollock, Sheldon I. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, And Power in Premodern India*. University of California Press, 2006. It should also be noted that the brahmans themselves appropriated the great epic from the domain of the Kshatriya warriors who, much in the spirit of Indo-European peoples, composed and retold some *ur*-form of the epic.

upper-caste employers in whose houses they work, while this aspect is obviously absent in the songs of wealthier women.[102]

In the Indian south, elements of Sanskrit-prescribed and other non-Dravidian cultures can be found in the earliest strata of Tamil literature. The great epics too have had their presence deeply felt from very early on in the Tamil land, and especially in the second half of the first millennium CE during the burgeoning Pallava and Chola kingdoms when we truly see a conscious synthesis of the Sanskritic northern culture and "indigenous" Tamil elements during the emergence of temple culture and new dynasties that needed the cultural authorization by the process of *sanskritization*.[103] We could describe sanskritization as a process of mimicking intellectual culture produced or preserved by the learned Sanskrit-speaking brahmanical castes by groups who, traditionally, had no access to brahmanical sources of knowledge and, thus, power. A. K. Ramanujan, one of the greatest translators of Tamil literature, describes the powerful allure of Sanskrit in the following words:

> Sanskrit had antiquity, hieratic pan-Indian prestige; it was the lingua franca of pundits, philosophers, epic poets, lawgivers, courts, and kings. It was unrivaled as model, metalanguage, as a source of forms, a standard, an ancestor even to languages unrelated to it. Sanskrit was culture.[104]

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[102] See Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu" in Richman, Paula *Many Ramayanas*: 114-137.

[103] The term was coined by the Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas in the 1950s.

[104] Nammāḻvār, and A. K. Ramanujan. *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981: 127.

The next step toward understanding the mythological pool of Aravan's festival must be sought in the Tamil versions of the Mahabharata epic and their related *Paratam* festivals primarily structured around goddess Draupadi.

THE CULTS OF DRAUPADI AND PATTINI, AND MIGRATORY MOTHER-GODDESS CULTS

The cult of Aravan can be understood as a part of the twin mytho-religious complex with the more dominant cult of Draupadi found in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu and southern parts of its northerly neighboring Andhra Pradesh. In India Draupadi is commonly known as one of the central characters in the Mahabharata, the wife of the five Pandava brothers whose disrobing by the enemies Kauravas at the infamous game of dice triggered the entire war. In the northern parts of Tamil Nadu, however, Draupadi (known in Tamil as Tiraupatiyamma̲n or Draupadi Amman), is also worshipped as the principal deity in a religious cult that draws much of its symbolism from the martial ideology articulated by the castes that were traditionally not *kshatriya* (warrior), and which, in its ritual and mythical dimensions is closer to more indigenous, Dravidian, concepts of the sacred and divine female power. This Draupadi thus, is a goddess that neatly fits the universe of South Indian *śakti* worship, and often resembles other South Indian unrestrained and dangerous goddesses such as Mariyamman and Kali.

Local mythological and religious fabric in both the Draupadi and Aravan cults is primarily influenced by the vernacular Tamil variants of the great epic. The earliest preserved Tamil rendering of the *Mahabharata* is Peruntēva̲nār's from the ninth century, while the most popular and influential one is Villiputtūr Ā̲lvār's *Makāpāratam* from the

fourteenth century.[105] Tamil composers drastically changed the "original" *Mahabharata* narrative transforming Aravan, a minor character in the Sanskrit version, into one of the central figures of the epic and its ritual re-enactments.[106] Similarly, the key players in the cult of Draupadi, the *Vanniyars* – Tamil low-caste farmers, cut off geographically from the northern settings of the Sanskrit epic, and socially from the brahmanic echelons of the society – in northern Tamil Nadu, singled out Aravan and the act of his self-sacrifice in their claim to military origins and *kshatriya* (classical Sanskrit umbrella term for the warrior caste) identity under the rule of the Nayaks in the Vijayanagar period.[107]

The locale of Gingee – the motherland of the Draupadi cult – plays an essential role in the cult.[108] This is due to the cult's association with particular castes of the region, namely the *vanniyars*, *konars*, and *vellalar mutaliyars*. The *vanniyar* caste is especially important. Although it technically belongs to the *śudra* category of the four *varnas* (the lowest one), the *vanniyars* have been showing indications of upward mobility and tend to see themselves as *kshatriyas*, the caste of warriors. This is demonstrated both historically in their association with the local rulers, especially Vijayanagar Nayaks, and mythologically since the caste origin legends talk about the *vanniyars'* birth from sacrificial fire of a primal sage named Śambhu.[109]

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[105] Hiltebeitel 1995: 451-453.

[106] In the Sanskrit version Aravan is known as Iravat.

[107] Ca 16th century CE (Hiltebeitel 1988: 38).

[108] Today a taluk (smaller administrative unit in the Indian states) headquarters in northern Tamilnadu.

[109] Hiltebeitel 1988, 36-7.

The Draupadi cult truly steps on the Hindu religious scene in the fourteenth century, the period overlapping with the Muslim excursions into the Tamil land and the creation of the *Villiparatam*. As its predecessor, however, the cult has the entire South Indian bhakti tradition, which became fully formed in the second half of the first millennium C.E., and it has continued to exert a tremendous influence on Tamil literary and religious culture in the subsequent centuries and into the present. In bhakti traditions, sacred places, abodes of the divine, become one of the central features of the entire religious movement.

Furthermore, Draupadi is in this South Indian cultic context also clearly identified with Devi and primarily so in her form of Durgā or Mahisāsuramardinī. Draupadi is in the Sanskrit version of the epic unmistakably identified with Śrī or Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort, yet it seems that there is a tendency in the folk traditions to link her with the Devi cluster of female deities. This mixture of Śaiva and Vaisnava elements is even more complex in the south because many South Indian forms of the goddess are identified as Krishna's sister.[110] Such a context created a perfect niche for Draupadi who in her cultic form gracefully shifts between various traditions of Hinduism. This is not a unique example of Draupadi's religious denomination identification shifting from the tamed and domesticated Vaishnava Sri to a fiercer and more irrepressible Shaiva female divine form. William S. Sax in his article on the Pandavalila tradition in the Uttarākhand area of Garhwal points to the fact that many members of this mountainous community understand Pāndavalīlā as the

[110] In Āntāl's *Tiruppāvai*, one of the best known works of early Tamil bhakti, little girls who participate in the *vrata* ritual dedicated to Krsna make a doll-like figure of sand that they worship. This doll, or *pāvai*, is later in the *Bhāgavatapurāna* identified as Kātyāyanī.

equivalent of the worship of the goddess Kali.[111] Draupadi is in this context regarded as an incarnation of the goddess Kali.

Another segment of the Draupadi cult suggestive of both its ability to change and its deep-rootedness in South Indian culture is represented by Draupadi's two guardians – Pōttu Rāja and Muttāl Rāvuttan. Muttāl Rāvuttan is a wonderful example of the transformability of folk traditions in general. As previously said, the Draupadi cult started developing sometime in the fourteenth century at the time of the first Muslim forays into the Dravidian south. Muttāl Rāvuttan, a Muslim cavalry trooper transformed into her devotee, can thus reflect the impact of militant Islam on Draupadi worshipping in its formative period. On the other hand, Pōttu Rāja, Hiltebeitel believes, is a form of Mahisāsura, the buffalo demon slain by Durgā, who is depicted in the cult as the bearer of the weapons that, in the hands of the goddess, transformed him into her devotee.

After taking a glance at some features of the Draupadi cult, let us consider the larger context of the mother goddess worshipping in South Asia which cannot be done without analyzing the ancient goddess Pattini. The anthropologist Obeyesekere who studied this goddess' cult in Sri Lanka believes that the goddess Pattini was very probably a cultural import from West Asia.[112] South India, even though surrounded on all sides except the North by the sea, was not an isolated land and from very early on in history it had very lively mercantile connections with the European ancient world, especially Rome, where

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[111] Sax, William S. "Ritual and Performance in the Pandavalila of Garhwal." In *Essays on the Mahabharata*, edited by Arvind Sharma, 274–95. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991: 274.

[112] Obeyesekere 1984, pp. 530-535.

numerous mother goddess or *magna mater* cults existed as expressions of the burgeoning mystery religions, the most popular ones being those of Cybele, Artemis, Isis and Dea Syria or Diasuria.[113] It is very likely, then, that merchants, along with their merchandize, also brought their religious beliefs and spiritual practices. The most important characteristics of these great-goddess cults were: venerating goddess as a *virgo intacta*, self-mutilation on the part of her male consorts or followers, and transvestism.

By far the most popular magna mater cult was the one of the gods Attis and Cybele whose most visible devotees were its priests, the so called *galli*.[114] The *galli*, according to the ancient chroniclers, Christian and pagan, were men wearing makeup, long hair, and soft and flowing clothes. They performed self-castration but it is not clear from the sources if all the *galli* underwent this procedure. Furthermore, they were involved in a number of rituals related to the Cybele-Attis deities and festivities, and they were also described as playing loud and rhythmic music, engaging in wild dancing and bawdy behavior. In Apuleius's second-century fable "Golden Ass" these mendicant priests are described as grotesquely made up and pretending to be possessed by the spirit of the goddess, and also cutting themselves with axes that they carried.[115]

As we can see, these descriptions of the *galli* are uncannily similar to the ones of Tamil transgender women involved in the Aravan festival. Another similarity with the

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[113] The most widespread ones were the cults of Cybele, Artemis, Isis and Dea Syria or Diasuria. (Obeyesekere 1984, pp. 533-534)

[114] See Roscoe, Will. "Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion." *History of Religions* 35, no. 3 (February 1, 1996): 195–230.

[115] Ibid., 202-3.

Indian context is the usage of terms such as *medium genus* and *tertium sexus* ('middle gender' and 'third sex' respectively) in the ancient literature in Latin to refer to these transgender magna mater priests, which are in the oldest Indian sources known in Sanskrit as *tritiya prakriti* ('third gender').[116]

The cult of Cybele originated in Phrygia, an ancient Anatolian kingdom, where Cybele was worshipped as the Mountain Goddess seated on or with a lion. It spread throughout the Greco-Roman world in which Cybele was also known as Kybele, Agdistis, Rhea, Meter Theon, Magna Mater, etc.[117] Although her cult was quite well-spread by the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, it was only in 204 BCE that the Roman Senate officially inaugurated the cult of Cybele (supposedly based on auguries, i.e., prophecies) and her annual festival taking place in April called Megalesia/Megalensia became an integral aspect of the Roman spiritual calendar. The popularity of her cult in the larger Mediterranean world is easily attested by the great quantity of votive reliefs and figurines portraying the goddess, discovered not only in religious architecture, but also in domestic and burial settings. Goddess' presence was everywhere.

This goddess, Devi, brings me back to the tirunangai Devi who supposedly first started going to Koovagam and spread the word about it.[118] She also evokes Sedgwick and

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[116] See Zwilling, Leonard, and Michael J. Sweet. "'Like a City Ablaze': The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 3 (January 1, 1996): 359–84.

[117] Roscoe, "Priests of the Goddess" 200.

[118] See fn. 30.

Moon's Divine, the drag star of John Waters' films,[119] whose name of Greco-Roman origin, meaning celestial, is perfectly cognate to the Sanskritic *Devī*. In the tirunangai Devi I also want to see the ancient Tamil *wayfaring* bard who sang about the glories of his chieftain patron residing at a particular place, or a bhakti poet who, possessed by the fervent love for his or her chosen god, sings of Krishna's manifold embodiments which are both anthropomorphic (as characters such as a charming cowherd, athletic wrestler, sensual lover, etc.) and geographically defined in his numerous sacred places. With Devi, who was later followed by many other Tamil transgender women, Koovagam became one of those *pāṭalpeṟṟa iṭams*, a place that have received a song.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I cannot remember the time when I did not have the word "gay" to refer to myself, when all I had was *peder* (Croatian for faggot), and *homić* (Croatian informal and derogatory term for homosexual) stemming from *other people's* taxonomies for me. I find it important to remember that when I think about what the association with the Aravan festival (and its related respect-granting authority) meant for Tamil transgender women who, before terms *aravani* and *tirunangai* came into currency, had no self-chosen transgender-affirmative names, but were rather caricatured and derided by terms *ali* (neuter), poṭṭai ("sissy"), *oṉpatu* (number nine),[120] and so on. In Michael Ende's

[119] See Moon, Michael, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "Divinity: A Dossier A Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion." *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 12–39.

[120] See chapter on tirunangai autobiographies to get a sense of how offensive and hurtful these terms are to Revathi and Smiley.

Neverending Story, the boy Bastian has to find a new name for the ruler of Fantasia, Childlike Princess, who, I believe, symbolizes a person's identity. This is further echoed in tirunangais' individual search for their names and identities, and especially in their individually chosen names which are often taken from popular film stars, or suggest greatness and divinity (like Sedgwick's Divine too, after all).

Although they have always been present in Tamil culture, by claiming Mohini, Aravan's wife, as their own mythological model, tirunangais acquire Koovagam as a place they never previously had as a group of ostracized individuals in the Tamil public space. In other words, I suggest the act of appropriating a religious myth, as a type of "owning one's story" or "coming out" that I discuss in the introductory essay, and which, before fully articulated in Revathi's and Smiley's self-narratives and Priya Babu's ethnographic study of her community, exists in Koovagam on a periperformative level.

I understand the re-enactment of the Aravan myth as a type of performative auto-biography, in which this myth-approved form of transgender expression is repeated endlessly by individual tirunangai bodies. The reason for looking at tirunangais' ritual involvement as [proto]autobiographic, is my reading of Sedgwick's *periperformative* utterances. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick develops the concept of the periperformative to build on the idea of interpellation proposed by Althusser, as the method by which subjects are incorporated into ideological formations. In order to so, she cites an illustration from J. L. Austin's work on performative utterances. Namely, Sedgwick is intrigued by utterances such as "I dare you" because although it seemingly encompasses only two persons (1st and

2nd persons), it also depends "on the tacit demarcation of the space of a third-person plural, a ''they'' of witness—whether or not literally present."[121]

The "I do" of the wedding ceremony, of course unsaid but rather expressed in a series of ritual gestures (primarily marked by accepting an Aravan priest's tying of the wedding thread around tirunangais' necks), is a form of periperformative dialogue monitored by non-tirunangai spectators (local villagers and media) in which tirunangais claim Koovagam as their origin place, and its identity-granting mythologies by borrowing a narrative *veṣam* (vesham), lit. guise, drag, as their mythological origin stories. This type of embodied "I am" is perhaps essential before the "I am" of the self-narratives can even come into existence as the most engaged and most political way of representing oneself.

At the end of this chapter, I should mention another similarity that I see between tirunangais and bhakti poets: they both insist on their signatures. Many bhakti poems are signed by the names of the poets (*bhaṇita*), unlike many other types of literature which have been in India often anonymous. This sense of immediacy and contact is, perhaps, one of the reasons why bhakti, as an extremely personal form of religious devotion, has been so immensely popular over the centuries. As A. K. Ramanujan explains, "such a signature… centers the poem in a locale and a person, relating god to poet, poet to poem, and poem to audience."[122]

[121] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 69.
[122] Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning*, 163.

By participating in continuously growing numbers in the Koovagam Aravan festival, Tamil transgender women have firmly inscribed themselves in Koovagam's mythological world by claiming the story of Aravan and Mohini as their own origin story. In their peregrinations, tirunangais have taken the Aravan story with them through the world (Tamiḷakam and other public spheres), thus making it the most defining narrative in their search of shame-free gender and sexual identities. Their emotionally embodied re-enactments of Aravan's wedding to Mohini, and Mohini's widowhood, become thus first instances of autobiographic expression (if we understand autobiography as owning the story of one's identity), which I deem to be absolutely central for any type of personal, and thus, political empowerment.

Chapter 2: Tirunangai Self-Narratives: "A Medicine for the Wounds of the Heart"[123]

ABSTRACT

In this chapter I focus on tirunangai self-narratives as the paradigms of performative writing and I claim that they are instances of "coming out," which I take as "a way of staking one's claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of the representational contract between one's body and one's world."[124] Thinking through Eve Sedgwick's scholarship on the relationship between gay performativity and shame, Ann Cvetkovich's concept of queer trauma, as well as Michael Jackson's work storytelling as a powerful palliative for trauma victims, I look at Living Smile Vidya's *Nān Vitiyā* ('I Am Vidya,' 2007) and Revathi's *Veḷḷai moḻi* (published in English as *The Truth about Me*, 2010) as instances of queer performativity negotiating inescapably painful experiences of shame and stigma. Revathi's account of being moved by her fellow tirunangais' stories in her collection of tirunangai life stories *Uṇarvum uruvamum* (2005) served as a profound illustration of the therapeutic quality of sharing stories about personal traumatic and shameful experiences, both to Revathi and to me (as explained in the introductory essay).

The authors whose writings I analyze in this chapter are Revathi and Living Smile Vidya. Revathi was born in a village in Namakkal, a small city in central Tamil Nadu in 1967. She is an author of a memoir titled *The Truth about Me* (published first in English in 2010 and the following year in in Tamil as *Veḷḷai moḻi*) and a compiler and editor of a

[123] Revathi, *Vellai moli: aravāniyin tanvaralāru* (Puttanattam: Ataiyālam, 2011): 260.

[124] Moon, Michael, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "Divinity: A Dossier a Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion." *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 12–39: 27.

collection of self-narratives of, mostly, Tamil transgender women whom she interviewed in 2004-2005. The latter book, *Uṇarvum uruvamum*, came out in 2005 and as a book by a transgender woman about transgender women its publication was a landmark in Tamil and Indian publishing. Living Smile Vidya (aka Smiley) hails from Tiruchirappalli, also central Tamil Nadu, and her memoir was, the first autobiography written by an Indian transgender woman.

By engaging with scholars working on trauma and affect I will discuss the salience of first-person narration rhetoric for transgender writers, the relationship between autobiographies and the genre of *testimonio* as used in instances of human rights abuse, relationship between shame and queer performativity, and the potential of the memoir as a therapeutic mode of writing. I posit that Revathi's and Smiley's writings have a testimonial, and therefore socially and politically engaged, dimension on the one hand, and a personal dimension aimed at healing one's deeply troubled past.

This chapter is based on the first piece of writing that I had ever done in this project, and, as I explain in the introductory essay, my particularly shattered state of being at the time of reading tirunangai self-narratives, made me particularly prone to empathize with Revathi's and Smiley's narratives of suffering. The result of this empathetic engagement directed me toward the scholarly work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, primarily her reading of Silvan Tomkins' work on affect, as well as her interpretation of J.L Austin's studies of performative utterances.[125] These approaches turned to be immensely fruitful for interrogating the relationship between shame and identity formation not only in the tirunangai self-narratives, but also, more importantly, in my own life. By empathizing with

[125] See Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2003; Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank, eds. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader.* Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1995; Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*: Second Edition. Edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà. 2nd Revised ed. edition. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Revathi and Smiley through their self-narratives, I also accidentally stumbled upon the process of self-discovery which led me to suggest a different methodological approach for studying and representing others, ethnography of empathy, which I explain in the introduction.

SHAME AND PERFORMATIVITY AS IDENTITY MAKERS

So why is autobiographic writing so significant in the construction tirunangais identities? Even at the very start of my research I realized that every aspect of tirunangai expression – be it artistic, literary, ritualistic, or political – is marked by the discourse of trauma and shame. This led me to Ann Cvetkovich and her book *An Archive of Feelings* in which she develops a thought-provoking theoretical framework for thinking about particular forms of trauma that do not "measure up to that of collectively experienced historical events, such as war and genocide," but rather to more insidious types of its belonging to the domestic or private sphere.[126] Cvetkovich argues that trauma is an inevitable part of a queer person's everyday life and because it "can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all."[127]

Along similar lines, anthropologist Michael Jackson forcefully asserts: "Trauma stuns, diminishes, and petrifies."[128] The result of this shattering effect of trauma on its victims is that "the habitual patterns of intersubjective connectedness and trust that link our lives to the lives of others, as well as to familiar objects, places, and stories, are broken.

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126 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003): 3.
127 Ibid., 7.
128 Michael Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen [Denmark]: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002): 105.

This loss is centered on the loss of language."[129] Elaine Scarry similarly observed in her 1985 study of pain: "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language."[130] In spite of these articulatory challenges of traumatized persons, Jackson strongly believes that storytelling, that is, speaking narratively about traumatic experiences, has a tremendous therapeutic power for the speakers:

> …in bridging the gap between private and public realms, storytelling enables the regeneration and celebration of social existence, without which we are nothing. Representing traumatic events as a story is a kind of redemption, for one both subverts the power of the original events to determine one's experience of them, and one moves beyond the self into what Buber calls an essential-we relationship, so opening oneself up to the stories of others and thereby seeing that one is not alone in one's pain.[131]

Tirunangais' life stories clearly demonstrate that one of the greatest burdens of transgender people in Tamil Nadu, from their early age onward, is being denied the right of rootedness. In other words, by being denounced as queer and different, transgender people are not afforded the right to actively participate in the life of a community. This is important to observe because unlike other marginalized and ostracized persons, such as Dalits (a self-chosen term for various groups of people in South Asia belonging to the so-called "untouchable" castes) and Adivasis (an umbrella term for various indigenous ethnic and tribal groups in South Asia), tirunangais, in an overwhelming majority of cases, do not

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[129] Ibid., 95

[130] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 4.

[131] Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling*, 58-9.

even have the support of their immediate families. This results in the feelings of isolation and shame, which accumulatively create insidious trauma that is only reinforced as transgender people experience other hierarchies of social living through education, work environment and other forms normativized by the state, religious institutions, etc.

Shame (Tam. *avamāṉam*), a word routinely present in almost any discourse about tirunangais or in their life stories – is a central concept for understanding trauma in the lives of Tamil transgender people. Drawing on the work of Michael Franz Basch and the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposed radical new ways of querying the relationship between queer identity and shame. Basch observed that shame can appear in infants as young as three months. Its physical expression is marked by the infants' lowering of its head and its gaze cast away as a result of rejection. In short, the infant, on not finding the loving eyes of its caregiver, feels shame in the face of its unfulfilled need. Consequently, Sedgwick interprets shame-humiliation "as an inability to effectively arouse the other person's positive reactions to one's communications,"[132] and therefore finds it essential to our identity formation.

Unsurprisingly, she takes this reasoning further by proposing that for queer persons "shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity," which "has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities." [133] Another vital point Sedgwick makes in regard to shame is its relationship to performativity, or as she puts it: "Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance."[134] We can hence understand "queer performativity" as "a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related

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[132] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2003): 37.
[133] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 64-5.
[134] Ibid., 38.

fact of stigma."[135] I believe it is useful to to read and interpret autobiographic writings of Tamil tirunangais as instances of queer performativity negotiating inescapably painful memories of shame and stigma in the development of individual tirunangai identities and even a distinct tirunangai culture.

Sedgwick was also concerned with the often-painful experiences and particular character of queer first-person performers, readers and audiences. For example, she forcefully argued that queer can signify only when attached to the first person. That is because, for Sedgwick, part of queer's experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself, and that is to say, the position from which we speak. Indeed, according to Sedgwick, anyone's use of 'queer' about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else because of the radically different connotations that seem to exist around the category. As a result, queer relies much more fundamentally on someone undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception.

Autobiography, apart from gender/queer theory, has been one of the most dominant genres of writing among openly transgender writers in the West for much longer than in South Asia. Some of the most famous western transgender autobiographies are Lili Elbe's *Man into Woman* (1933), *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (1967), and *Conundrum* by Jan Morris (1974). With Revathi's and Smiley's memoirs, Indian literature finally joined the Western transgender literary tradition which not only shocked and ignited sensationalist media coverage, but also educated and sensitized the general public about transgender identities and lives.

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[135] Ibid., 61.

Revathi's and Smiley's memoirs, however, differ in many ways from the "classical" transgender autobiographies in Europe and the United States. A primary difference is that Revathi's and Smiley's memoirs are not as focused on sex reassignment surgery (SRS) as their Western counterparts. The fetishization of SRS perhaps emerged because, is due to the fact, as Sandy Stone observes in her classical essay "The *Empire* Strikes Back," transgender narratives echoed medical discourses on transsexualism produced in clinics that experimentally started performing SRS in the early 1960s, and autobiographical texts started mimicking the models of those who have been successful in achieving sex transformation.[136] In other words, we can interpret a number of transsexual autobiographies, especially those from the 1960s, as serving to encourage and enable transsexual subjects to conform to the parameters of an established "transsexual personal history" in order to obtain the desired medical treatment.[137]

The Tamil first-person narratives, as we will see, certainly pay much attention to the *nirvāṇam*, basically a castration surgery, as one of the essential experiences in the life of a Tamil transgender woman, but we can also hear other voices, especially in *Uṇarvu uruvamum*, that subvert and challenge the necessity of its performance and offer other ways in which we can understand tirunangai identities. Considering the increasing media, academic, and just purely voyeuristic interest in tirunangais, it is momentous to finally have transgender voices speaking for themselves, or, as Gayatri Spivak articulated, "a genre of

[136] Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker (Hoboken: CRC Press, 2006): 225.

[137] Bernice L. Hausman, "Body, Technology, and Gender in Transsexual Autobiographies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker (Hoboken: CRC Press, 2006), 335–62: 337.

the subaltern giving witness to oppression to a less oppressed other."[138] Let us take a look now at what they have to tell us.

REVATHI

It is not easy to summarize the narrative of Revathi's *Veḷḷai Moḻi* because it records, in some three hundred pages, an irrepressible lava of events in a chronological order. When discussing the narratives structured around trauma, anthropologist Michael Jackson observes that there are stories that are easier to be told than others, such as those of "nation building and cultural identity [rather] than stories in which nationality, culture and identity are obliterated by the sheer complexity and critical mass of lived experience."[139] Narratives of the latter kind are not built around familiar concepts and have no teleological design, or, in other words, no ethically or aesthetically satisfying conclusion.

By the same token, Revathi does not write her memoir from a hard-won position of success and comfort from which she looks back at her life recounting the path of pain and struggle which are ultimately resolved and overcome. Rather, her narrative simply ends when it reaches the present in her life. Whether this kind of narrative strategy was planned or it simply evolved so due to the author's lack of experience with formal writing I cannot tell – even though I suspect it is the latter – but the uncertainty of the ending and the concern we might have, if prone to empathy, for the future of the author, undoubtedly lends the text a particular kind of rawness and immediacy that highlights even more Revathi's personal plight and that of her fellow-tirunangai.

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[138] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and Circumfession," in Postcolonialism and Autobiography: Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa, ed. Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, and Opal Palmer Adisa (Amsterdam ; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998): 7.

[139] Michael Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen [Denmark]: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002): 105.

Additional rawness is also rendered by Revathi's usage of colloquial and spoken Tamil; in the first part of the book most of the text is written in spoken Tamil, at moments switching to the written conventions of the language, but toward the end of the book the usage of written Tamil is dominant.[140] In what follows, I will attempt to compress the most important episodes of her life to illustrate the enormity of her experiences. It is important to note that since there are very few dates mentioned in the book, it is sometimes difficult to determine when particular events occurred.

Revathi is born in a small village in the Nammakkal district of central Tamil Nadu in a family belonging to the landowning caste (*gounder* or *kavuṇṭar*) that runs a milk delivery business. Assigned the male gender at the time of her birth Revathi is raised as a boy by the name of Turaisami (Duraisami), along with her two older brothers and two older sisters. From a very early age Revathi plays only with girls, enjoys women's household chores and drawing the kolam in front of the house.[141] In her teenage years she is increasingly confused about feeling like a girl, and at the same time teased and insulted for being girlish. This has a repercussion on her education and she fails the 10th grade (around the age of 15) and she never continues her education. Around thistime she meets other boys and men who either act or feel like girls and she starts regularly meeting them on a hill at the border of the Namakkal town. There she hears of tirunangais who undergo the *nirvanam* surgery and live as women in faraway metropolitan cities.

Without informing her parents, Revathi goes to Dindigul to meet a group tirunangais who meet there for the annual Amman (goddess) festival in which they dance.

[140] Tamil is a diglossic language whose written and spoken forms are radically different on lexical, phonological and morphological levels.

[141] An auspicious design, common in South India, drawn on the ground in front of the house in white or colored powder.

She meets them there and decides to be made a *cēlā* (chela),[142] that is, a newly initiated tirunangai, to a guru who gives her the female name Revathi after the then famous Tamil actress. Her guru leaves for Delhi and Revathi decided to go to Erode to her guru's guru (*nāṉi*) with whom she stays for a month or so learning the *karakāṭṭam* dance. Missing her family she returns to her village for her sister's wedding where she is forced to work for the family milk delivery company. Hating her job and how her family treats her she decides to join her guru in Delhi and with this starts a never-ending series of flights from one place to another.

In Delhi she joins her guru and starts begging in the markets shop to shop as is the custom among transgender women in northern India known as *hijras*. She learns about the complicated hijra kinship system and their convoluted hierarchy. She misses her family and goes back to them. Her brothers beat her up, shave her hair off and she runs away again to Delhi. There her guru's family does not want to deal with a bald novice hijra and they send her off to Mumbai to her guru's guru. They perform another chela-guru initiation ceremony because her Delhi association is not recognized in Mumbai. She works as a servant in her new guru's house hoping to be sent off to have her nirvāṇam performed.

After six months in Mumbai, Revathi and another young chela are given money to go to Dindigul in Tamil Nadu and have their nirvanam performed at a local clinic. After this harrowing experience, which I will discuss later in detail, she returns to Mumbai via Chennai, where she recuperates and has her post-operation ritual ceremony and feast. After working as a hijra beggar again she leaves her old guru's house and finds another guru who procures her as a sex worker so that she can earn her keep. She is eighteen around this time.

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[142] I speak elsewhere of the tirunaṅkai kinship terminology. It will suffice here to say that Indian transgender communities are highly hierarchized systems that differ from state to state. At its basis is the idea of family formation through ritualized adoption (Tam. tatteṭuppu). A novice tirunaṅkai hence has a guru (nāṉi) who has her own guru and so on.

After being raped by a ruffian Revathi leaves Mumbai and returns to her family again. They reluctantly take her back but she is basically kept confined in the house for fear of bringing shame to the family. Unhappy with this situation she returns to Mumbai to her first guru who forgives her and puts her up in another guru's shack to do sex work. During this time, she starts drinking to cope with her issues of shame and guilt. After a violent incident with transgender sex workers from another clan/family of Mumbai hijras, her guru transfers her to one of her own brothels where Revathi attends to women sex workers running errands for almost no money. Not being able to tolerate the wretchedness of the confined and exploited women that she waited on, and her own impecunious conditions, Revathi again returns to her village. There she teams up with her father against her brothers who insist their father divide and sell the family house and land.

Eventually Revathi sells her share of the land to her brothers and starts living independently renting a room in the same village. After an unsuccessful love affair with a movie theater operator from Namakkal, Revathi takes off again, but this time to Bangalore. There she meets some tirunangais she knew in Mumbai and starts living in them in a dingy bathhouse they ran. She starts doing sex work with the others, but her colleagues experience unspeakable brutality from police and gangsters, who constantly threaten transgender sex workers.

At one point Revathi is approached by three young novices who want to become her chelas. She starts working for Sangama, an NGO providing help for LGBT people in Karnataka and for this we have a date – 1999. She starts having an affair with a man from her office, who marries her in a small temple ceremony. She moves in with him but after a year he leaves her, which completely devastates her. The same year, 2004, she experiences

the death of her Bangalore guru and of one of her chelas, Famila, and becomes seriously suicidal. [143]

Early in 2005 she starts working on compiling life experiences of, mostly, Tamil tirunangais, with a funding received from Sangama. The book is published the same year and it draws considerable public attention but she decides to leave Sangama and Bangalore and help her mother who is dying. Having spent all her money on her mother's medical treatments Revathi returns to Bangalore. She contemplates being a sex worker again and starting her own tirunangai family, but instead returns to Sangama.

It could be said that Revathi's *Veḷḷai moḻi* came into being because of her ethnographic work on collecting tirunangai self-narratives in Tamil Nadu published in the book *Uṇarvum uruvamum*, which itself coalesced from the encounter between the immensity of Revathi's personal suffering and her hearing of other tirunangais painful experiences. She clearly states in her memoir that meeting, talking, and recording the struggle of transgender women against social stigma and prejudices, as well as government indifference and inefficiency, helped her cope with her own life:

I still shudder, recalling the way the aravanis I spoke to sobbed and screamed when they recounted stories of their mothers, lovers, husbands… I who had asked if I had been singled out for sorrow found out through these interviews that many others were subject to enormous pain despite which they present a smiling face to the world. My difficulties were nothing compared to some of the things I heard.[144]

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[143] Famila was a charismatic young tirunaṅkai who was from a, supposedly, wealthy family and English educated. Revathi could not quite understand how she could have any appeal to this modern and fashionable transgender young woman yet they had a very close relationship. Famila taught her many things that Revathi with her limited education never had access to such as, for instance, LGBT activism, human rights, and so on. Famila was very active in LGBT and NGO circles in Bangalore, known to be kind and supportive to everyone, and her death sent ripples through the Bangalore LGBT communities. Her friends and coworkers annually organize a cultural program in her memory.

[144] Revathi, *The Truth about Me*, 294-5.

This sentiment resonates quite congruously with Jackson's claim that storytelling is usually prompted by some crisis in a person's relationship with others and with the world, inhibiting the person's autonomy and the possibility of action.[145] When the ability to narrate occurs though, "in comparing notes, exchanging views, and sharing stories, the sufferer is no longer condemned to singularity and silence, and the burden of shame or guilt that was the intrapsychic price paid for one's isolation, is lifted."[146] Revathi articulates this succinctly and beautifully in the Tamil version of the book:[147] "I felt my work as a medicine for the wounds of my heart."[148]

This experience prompted Revathi to write her own autobiography because she felt that there were things unsaid in her fellow tirunangai narratives that she recorded, but also because she started remembering traumatic episodes of her own life. But there is a yet another source of inspiration for her autobiography. In an interview for *The Hindu*, Revathi admits that she was never an avid reader, but that she had read twice Bama's *Karukku*, which deeply moved her and showed her that this kind of writing was possible.[149] *Karukku* is an autobiographical novel written by a Tamil Christian Dalit woman whose penname is Bama. *Karukku*, which in Tamil means the serrated edge of the palmyra palm leaf, was published in 1992 and it narrates the life story of a Dalit woman and her experience of caste oppression within the Catholic Church as she negotiates the tension between the self and the community.

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145 Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling*, 18.

146 Ibid., 58-9.

147 The Tamil and the English versions of the book differ at some places.

148 Appaṇiyai eṉ maṉatil ēṟpaṭṭa kāyaṅkaḷukku maruntāka uṇarntēṉ (Rēvati, Veḷḷai moḻi, 260).

149 See "Voice for Visibility." *The Hindu*, September 4, 2010. http://www.thehindu.com/books/voice-for-visibility/article613669.ece.

Bama's life is presented as a process of self-reflection and recovery from social and institutional betrayal and this may have prompted Revathi to write her own self-narrative. However, unlike Revathi's memoir, *Karukku* avoids the confessional mode and many personal details are omitted. The protagonist is never named, even though the text is written in the first person. The events of Bama's life are not ordered chronologically, but rather organized under different themes, such as "Work," "Games and Recreation," "Education," "Belief," etc., which, as we have seen, is not the case with Revathi's style of storytelling. Ultimately, what shapes the book and gives it its provocative edge (*karukku*) is Bama's journey toward integrity as a Dalit and Christian.

A scholar Pramod Nayar interpreted *Karukku* as a *testimonio* rather than an example of confessional writing.[150] Nayar here refers to published oral or written autobiographical narratives of first-person accounts of human rights abuses, violence and war, and living under conditions of social oppression. The usage of this term emerged in Latin America (Spanish 'testimonio') from human rights tribunals, truth commissions, and other international human rights instruments in countries such as Chile and Argentina. Nayar's argument is the following:

Autobiography presupposes an autonomous individual subject. Testimonio, on the other hand, is a genre where the narrator stands in for the whole social group. Bama's constant movement from the individual to the collective suggests that *Karukku* is less an autobiography than a collective biography.

[150] Pramod K. Nayar, "Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio," The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 41, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 84.

He further suggests that Bama uses specific rhetorical devices in order "to create a space of intersubjectivity, of bearing witness."[151] This strategy produces two types of witnessing: "the primary witnessing by the victim (here, Bama) and the secondary witnessing by the reader."[152]

We can certainly read Revathi's memoir as a testimonio. In the preface to the English publication of the book – the Tamil version curiously has no preface written by Revathi – the author tells us that "by publishing [her] life story, larger changes can be achieved," and that she hopes the book "will make people *see* [my emphasis] that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work."[153] She also tells us that her "story is not meant to offend, accuse or hurt anyone's sentiments," but rather "to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires."[154] Revathi clearly wants her readers to bear witness to the suffering of her community and this this acts of seeing and being introduced to evidently correspond to Nayar's concept of secondary witnessing. However, there is too much of Revathi's 'me' in the memoir to read it only as a testimonio. Although the author is aware of the fact that self-narrative writing can have political connotations I would argue that *The Truth about Me* should be read as Revathi's therapeutic strategy to cope with her own demons.

Her 'me' is in the very title, and the book is about, as she formulates it, "*my* everyday experience of discrimination, ridicule and pain… about *my* endurance and *my* [all emphases mine] joys."[155] Even the Tamil title, i.e. subtitle, emphasizes singularity – *aravāṇiyin taṉvaralāṟu*, an aravāṇi's self-history (autobiography). There are many other

[151] Ibid., 91.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Revathi, The Truth about Me, v.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.

instances where she provides too much personal information for a testimonio. For example, after her castration surgery was performed Revathi began doing sex work in Mumbai. It is a known fact that many Indian transgender women engage in sex work; however, rather than, for instance, underscoring the abject circumstances forcing tirunangais to be subjected to this line of work, Revathi simply tells us that the reason why she joined her guru's brothel for work was that she was eighteen years old and, well, basically horny:

> I was eighteen. I couldn't control my sexual urges anymore. Just as the stomach can be hungry, the body can be hungry too… If I go to a place where they do sex work perhaps I will be able to get the sex I need.[156]

Furthermore, and importantly, Revathi's life story is dissimilar to many other tirunangais whose lives are dictated by stringent and exploitative hierarchical structures of the tirunangai households and families, and their limited work options in the forms of sex work and begging. In a significant way, Revathi should be seen as a kind of tirunangai who stands in between the confines of the traditional tirunangai society and their focus on etiquette – or, as Gayatri Reddy's Hyderabadi informants would call it, *izzat*, honor or respect – and the new world of NGOs and human rights activism in which Revathi was certainly one of the pioneers.

At the end of her memoir Revathi is disillusioned by everything; she lost the people she loved dearly, experienced betrayal by her husband, and lost almost all of her savings on her mother's medical treatments. And while she previously found strength among her fellow tirunangais, this time she feels the need to be alone and do things her

[156] patiṉeṭṭu vayatu. pāluṇarvaik kaṭṭuppaṭutta muṭiyavillai. vayiṟṟup paci eppaṭiyō appaṭitāṉ uṭal pacikūṭa. pāliyal toḻil naṭattum iṭattiṟkuc ceṉṟālāvatu eṉakkut tēvaiyāṉa ceks kiṭaikkalām (Rēvati, Veḷḷai moḻi, 88).

own way: I have decided to live alone, alienated from everyone."[157] The last sentence of the memoir is: "Yes, I have gone back to Sangama and am continuing *my* [emphasis mine] struggle."[158]

I would argue that *Uṇarvum uruvamum* parallels a testimonio to a greater extent. The title in Tamil literally means 'feeling, body,' or 'feelings and bodies' but whose feelings and bodies are they? Revathi groups the collected self-narratives into chapters such as "Childhood and Schooling" (*kuḻantaipparuvamum paḷḷipparuvamum*), "Parents and Society" (*peṟṟōr maṟṟum camutāyam*), "Work Experiences" (*toḻil aṉupavaṅkaḷ*), "Love and Family Life" (*kātal maṟṟum kuṭumpa vāḻkkai*), "Nirvāṇam and the Milk Pouring Ceremony – Goddess Worship" (*nirvāṇam maṟṟum pāl ūṟṟum viḻā – mātā pūjai*), and so on. She provides the names of the interviewed tirunangais (Rōjā, Cānti Ammā, Rañcitā, Aruṇā, Suntarī, and many others) but no other information about them – apart from what we learn about them from their own narratives – and the final impression, consequently, while reading the book is that all these voices merge into one *uruvam* (body) of the collective tirunangai experience.[159] In other words, even though we hear these voices as the voices of individuals, it is their shared experience of familial and social marginalization, and other previously discussed forms of trauma, that trumps individuality and draws attention to tirunangais as a group. That Revathi envisioned for *Uṇarvum Uruvamum* to have some testimonial value is perhaps evident from the following passage:

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[157] maṟṟavarkaḷukkākavum eṉ kuṭumpattiṉarukkākavum eṉṉait taṉimaip paṭuttikkoṇṭu vāḻa muṭivu ceytuviṭṭēṉ (Ibid., 271).

[158] ām, tirumpavum nāṉ caṅkamāvil cērntu eṉ pōrāṭṭattait toṭarntu irukkiṟēṉ (Ibid.).

[159] Rather than interpreting the clitic –um as a case of 'AND' coordination, we could interpret it as expressing all- inclusive sense, and translate Uṇarvum Uruvamum as 'all the feelings, all the body.' The Penguin India website, for example, translates it as 'Feelings of the Entire Body' ("A. Revathi," accessed December 29, 2014, http://www.penguinbooksindia.com/en/node/120).

> There was a time when I wrote poetry and my life history and this experience made me write about the others. All of these [collected self-narratives of other tirunangais] are documents.[160]

Veḷḷai moḻi, the Tamil title of Revathi's memoir, literally means 'white language,' but its idiomatic usage suggests guileless or frank speech. The concern with veracity is of course also evident in the English version of the book. How truthful is Revathi in her memoir? While there is certainly no way to know for sure, the detailed accounts of her narratives, and the overwhelming torrent of events that she feverishly lists, suggest that she tries to free herself of memories in order to reach a kind of purging or catharsis. We thus hear of her sexual desires, drunken fights, stealing her mother's jewelry, and other unflattering episodes that she need not have included considering the prejudice most people have of tirunangais as sex crazed deviants and criminals. Revathi talks about her writing process in the preface to *Uṇarvum uruvamum*:

> I didn't write my story in one breath. I would read what I've written, and as I read, the long forgotten memories would resurface like in the film *Autograph*. And I would rewrite them again and again.[161]

The question of the veracity of autobiographical accounts is not that relevant to the anthropologist Michael Jackson, but rather creating a sense of reality that makes sense to the writer, but also to the readers:

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[160] oru kaṭṭattil nāṉ eṉṉuṭaiya vāḻkkai varalāṟu eḻutiya kavitaikaḷ eḻutiya aṉupavam eṉṉai maṟṟavar paṟṟiyum eḻuta vaittatu. avaiyellām āvaṇaṅkaḷāka irukkiṉṟaṉa (Rēvati, *Uṇarvum Uruvamum*, 11-12).

[161] eṉṉuṭaiya kataiyai nāṉ orē mūccil eḻutiviṭavillai. Naṭantu muṭinta maṟantupōṉa eṉ paḻaiya niṉaivukaḷ ellām 'āṭṭōkirāp' paṭampōla niṉaivukku varum. avaṟṟaiyellām mīṇṭum mīṇṭum eḻuti eḻutuvēṉ (Ibid., 12).

> Stories are counterfactual or fictional, not because they aspire to mirror reality and fail, nor because they offer escapes from reality, but because they aid and abet our need to believe that we may discern and determine the meaning of our journey through life: where we came from and where we are going…In this pragmatist sense the truth or falsity of a story cannot be decided by measuring it against some outside reality, for what matters is how stories enable us to regain some purchase over the events that confound us, humble us, and leave us helpless, salvaging a sense that we have some say in the way our lives unfold. In telling a story we renew our faith that the world is within our grasp.[162]

To sum up, by digging into the recesses of her mind, salvaging memories, and rewriting them constantly, Revathi essentially reworks her reality in order to make it tolerable. What emerges from this compulsive activity is a queer confessional that is structured around shame with which she can only cope through writing. *Uṇarvum uruvamum*, in contrast, can be read as a piece of collective autobiographical writing that has urgency of a testimonio.

LIVING SMILE VIDYA'S *NĀN VITYĀ*

Smiley's memoir is much slimmer than Revathi's. It opens dramatically with her nirvanam surgery at a clinic in Andhra Pradesh and then goes back to her childhood after which she continues her story in a, more or less, chronological order. She is born in 1982 in a poor family in Tiruchirappalli as the youngest child and, being assigned the male

[162] Jackson, Politics of Storytelling, 16-17.

gender at birth, she is raised as the only boy in the family with two older sisters.[163] She is given the name Caravaṇaṉ (Saravanan) since her, otherwise rather atheistic father, made a vow to name his son after Murugan. When Smiley starts going to school and shows signs of scholarly excellence her father, working as a poor sweeper, begins having a lot of expectations from her – since she is perceived as the only son – with dreams of her eventually becoming the District Collector by clearing the prestigious IAS examinations. Being seen as the only son, everybody in the family pampers her with all that they could afford, thereby ensuring necessary support for her studies. Expectations become so high that she just cannot afford to think about anything other than the first rank in class.

After being first in her class for five consecutive years Smiley comes second in the six grade exams and her father savagely beats her. Also around this time, when Smiley was eleven, her mother dies in a road accident and her father remarries. Smiley increasingly has urges to express her femininity and when she does it she is ridiculed or beaten. The narrative rushes through her high school years and we find her in college studying information technology where she also discovers the world of theater and literature. During this time, she finds out about an NGO in Tiruchirappalli where she could meet other queer people but she is cautious about coming out as a transgender person. After college, much to her father's chagrin, Smiley enrolls in the MA linguistics program at Thanjavur University where she also becomes active in the theater department, helping with staging plays and on occasion joining tours.

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163 Following the GLAAD's reference guide on how to write about transgender people (http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender): Problematic: "biologically male," "biologically female," "genetically male," "genetically female," "born a man," "born a woman." Preferred: assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth or designated male at birth, designated female at birth Problematic phrases like those above are reductive and overly-simplify a very complex subject. As mentioned above, a person's sex is determined by a number of factors - not simply genetics - and one's biology does not "trump" one's gender identity. Finally, people are born babies - they are not "born a man" or "born a woman."

Upon the completion of her MA Smiley cannot stand living like a man anymore and goes to Chennai. There she meets a tirunangai who sends her off to her guru in Pune. In Pune she becomes a member of a tirunangai family and starts working as a beggar on the streets and trains. After a while they organize for her to have her nirvāṇam done after which she continues working as a beggar in Pune and on Marathi trains. Realizing that sooner or later she would have to start doing sex work Smiley runs away and lands in Madurai where after some initial problems she gets a job at a bank issuing micro credits to farmers. Mingling among artists and intellectuals in Madurai, Smiley is encouraged to write about her life, which she first starts doing as a blog on the internet which later grew into her memoir. In the final chapter Smiley tells us that she left Madurai for Chennai and the last couple of pages is a tirade against the bad treatment of transgender people in Tamil/Indian society.

Smiley's autobiography – although also appealing to the larger public through depictions of the abjectness of tirunangais' lives – is in many respects quite different from Revathi's. Her performative queer "I" is strongly present already in the title *Nān Vityā* (I am Vidya), with her male name Caravaṇaṉ (Saravanan) crossed out with a red line before her female name. On a black-and-white photograph decorating the cover, we can see the close-up of Vidya's pretty and young, yet unsmiling face – incongruous with her Living Smile moniker – that is rather calmly but so defiantly looking at us as if challenging us. And her writing certainly wants to do just that: challenge us.

Smiley's writing is marked by a high-register literary variety of Tamil, interspersed with sections of spoken Tamil (but only for the dialogues), distinguished by thoughtful grammatical, syntactical and vocabulary choices. Smiley's MA degree in linguistics, and a long-standing interest in literature and theater, allowed her to expressively and eloquently write about her experiences as a transgender woman in Tamil society. It could be argued

that the literary sophistication of her autobiography might have an added purpose if we bear in mind how praised and adored well-written and well-spoken articulation in the Tamil language is in its culture. In other words, by demonstrating her linguistic skills,

Smiley's memoir has a literary quality evident at the very beginning with the simple yet elegant opening sentence: "Having a window seat on the train is the most pleasant way to travel."[164] Revathi's autobiography, in contrast, begins with a very direct and colloquial: "My birthplace is a small village."[165] Beginning with the train ride of the opening sentence that takes Smiley from Pune to Kadapa in Andhra Pradesh for her nirvanam, Smiley skillfully uses the train as a recurring motif in her life. She describes the excitement of her childhood trips, the long yet pleasant commutes between Tiruchirappalli and Thanjavur during her college days, as well as the train-hopping adventures in Maharashtra during her days as a begging tirunangai.

Train is an important reality in the lives of Indian transgender women because it is not only a vehicle that transports them from small towns and villages to big cities, but also a vehicle on the mental maps of their dreams and longings that promises better futures and enchanted lives. It is also a virtual place of work for many of them, where they go begging or entertaining passengers for money. Revathi specifically mentions in her book the pleasure of buying train tickets on her days off in Mumbai when she could pretend to be

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[164] jaṉṉalōra rayil payaṇam mikavum cukamāṉatu (Living Smile Vidya, *Nāṉ, Vityā* (Chennai: Kiḻakku, 2007): 9).

[165] eṅka ūru ciṟiya kirāmam (Rēvati, *Veḷḷai moḻi*, 3.)
Those who are familiar with the Dravidian concept of ūr might object to it being translated as 'birth place.' It certainly has a much larger semantic field in Tamil culture. It is a place of ancestral belonging, or, as Valentine Daniel would put it, "[a territory] inhabited by human beings who are believed to share in the substance of the soil of that territory" (E. Valentine Daniel, Fluid Signs: *Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 63). The usage of the pronoun eṅka (our), rather than eṉ (my) when referring to one's ūr, suggests the deep involvement not only with the land but also with its people.

just like any other woman, unlike the days when she hopped from train to train with no ticket, because working transgender women never buy them.[166]

The influence of Tamil films and their very common convention of flashbacks is noticeable in the first chapter of Smiley's memoir. The usage of this cinematic technique is not very unusual considering the centrality of the castration surgery in the lives of many tirunangais. With the nirvanam story Smiley movingly depicts a painful and traumatic, yet also the most important experience in her life. By doing so she creates a dramatically charged moment that immediately plunges her readers not only into the world of underground medical facilities and malpractice, but also into the world of rough, slap-of-love[167] tirunangai solidarity. Because it is this "birth" that matters the most to her and not the one, as she tells us at the beginning of the second chapter, when her parents named her Saravanan.[168] Following the flashback technique through to the end, Smiley ends the first chapter in a fade-in moment, in which she as the main star of her story is lying on a cot in a grimy hospital raving in the agony of pain:

> Mom, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan anymore. I am Vidya. Entirely Vidya. Entirely woman. Where are you, mom? Can't you come for a moment by some magic? Squeeze my hand in support just once? My heart broke and is in pieces. Radha, please, I am not your younger brother anymore but your younger sister… Dad, look! Look at my cut-up body! It's

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166 Rēvati, *Veḷḷai moḻi*, 73.

167 Here I am referring to Michael Cunnigham's poignant journalistic story "The Slap of Love," "the story of Angel Segarra, a Puerto Rican kid from the South Bronx who became Angie Xtravaganza, doyenne of the drag world made briefly famous by Jennie Livingston's acclaimed 1990 documentary, Paris Is Burning." (Michael Cunningham, "The Slap of Love," Open City 6, Spring 1998, 175-195.)

168 eṉ mutal piṟappiṉpōtu eṉ perṟōr eṉakku vaitta peyar caravaṇaṉ (Living Smile Vidya, Nāṉ , Vityā: Oru Tirunaṅkaiyiṉ Ulukkiyeṭukkum Vālk̲kai Aṉ upavaṅkaḷ (Chennai: Kiḻ akku, 2007): 20).

a different body now. I can take all this pain, even more. Look! Look on me as a girl, dad, accept me! Only I could hear me scream.[169]

One of the greatest fascinations that people have about transgender people in India is about their genitalia. In other words, the question of gender identity is inevitably always tied to the (supposed) reality of sex organs. For many tirunangais this is true too. Many feel that they inhabit wrong bodies, hate their male genitalia, and fantasize about the final moment when they will have their male organs surgically removed. The so-called nirvanam procedure is absolutely central in their lives and is considered a matter of prestige for those who have undergone it.[170] The nirvanam is essentially a castration surgery in which the penis and testicles are excised. It is performed either by traditional *tāyammās*,[171] who are medically untrained and considered to be guided by Bahuchara Mata,[172] or illegally in clinics, very often in unwholesome conditions. However, both types of operation are life threatening.

The trauma of the experience lies in the fact that the details of the operation are in many cases unfamiliar to tirunangais and can sometimes be purposely shrouded in mystery by their gurus. Furthermore, it is a known fact that the surgery is very dangerous and that

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169 ammā, ammā nāṉ peṇṇāki viṭṭēṉ. iṉi nāṉ caravaṇaṉ illai. vityā. muḻu vityā. muḻup peṇ. ammā nī eṅkē irukkiṟāy. eppaṭiyāvatu māyam ceytāvatu oru kaṇam eṉ arukil vāyēṉ. oru muṟai eṉ kaiyai ātaravākap paṟṟikkoḷ. eṉ irutayam veṭittuc citaṟuvataip pōlirukkiṟatu. rātā, pḷīs rātā nāṉ ippa tampi illai rātā, taṅkacci. uṉ taṅkacci... appā, pāruṅkappā, aṟuntu kiṭakkum eṉ uṭampap pāruṅka... itu veṟum oṭamputāṉ. inta vali ellāttaiyum tāṉkikkaṟēṉ... iṉṉum evvaḷavu vali vantālum taṅkikkiṟēṉ. itap paruṅka... ippavāvatu eṉṉaip poṉṉā pāruṅkappā... eṉṉai ēttukkōṅkappā... eṉ kataṟal eṉakku maṭṭumē kēṭṭukkoṇṭirukkiṟatu (Living Smile Vidya, *Nāṉ Vityā*, 19.)

170 The procedure and its related rituals and ceremonies seem to be pan-Indian. The procedure is in the non-Tamil speaking areas referred to as nirvāṇ (Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 56; Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 26).

171 North Indian term *dai ma* meaning midwife (Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 27).

172 Bahuchara Mata or Bedhraj Mata is a Gujarati goddess embraced by many transgender women of India as their principal deity, and especially worshipped during the nirvanam and postoperative rituals.

some do not survive it. Revathi was one of those people who knew almost nothing about the surgery. It is absolutely shocking and hair-raising to read about the operation that Revathi underwent – the ignorance of the people involved in the procedure, the uncertainty of its outcome, and the utter loneliness of the experience.

According to Revathi's account, one day she and another chela were given 7,000 Rs by their guru to go from Mumbai (in Maharashtra) to Dindigul (in central Tamil Nadu) to have their nirvanam done (it was decided that the traditional *tāyammā* operation would not be suitable to them). The place of surgery was a small building away from the main compound of the hospital. Both transgender women were terribly frightened. A doctor showed up, but the only time he addressed Revathi was when he asked her whether she wanted it arranged down there in the way men pee or women pee.

After the surgery, Revathi was laid down on a metal cot covered with a plastic sheet, and very soon the operated area started hurting and she started screaming in pain. A nurse came and told her to be quiet so that others in the vicinity would not hear her screams, and Revathi thus realized that the operation was performed illegally. Revathi comforted herself through the ordeal by telling herself that it had to hurt if she wanted to become a woman but was also aware that they were not receiving the care that they should. Since they ran out of money, Revathi and her fellow tirunangai had to leave before their wounds could fully heal, and from there her story only gets worse.

They were not able to get aboard the train for Mumbai so they decided to take a bus for Chennai, from where, they thought, they would take a train to Mumbai. They ended up on the back seats of a very crowded bus on which they ould feel every bump on the road, and because their wounds had not healed they kept fainting with pain and exhaustion. Upon reaching the train station in Chennai they realized that they did not have enough money to buy the tickets for Mumbai and were, moreover, cruelly teased by a woman working in the

women's restroom. In the end they are helped by a group of tirunangais headed for Mumbai too.[173]

Even though Smiley had been informed about the details of the surgery she was shocked by the experience of it. Although initially excited about it, her uneasiness starts to grow when she sees names of women written on the walls of the room assigned to them in the clinic, and she realizes that those are the names of tirunangais who were there before and who, fearing the death on the operation table, inscribed their names on the wall to ensure that at least they survive if their bodies cannot.[174] When they take her to the "operation theater" she realizes that she is in fact going to a tiny room looking like a butcher's shop.[175] The spinal injections administered for anesthesia do not work and she is in a terrible pain during the operation. She finds the atmosphere of non-communication with the doctors and the silence forced on her especially frustrating.

There are other similarly gruesome stories in *Uṇarvum uruvamum*, including one of a castration performed in the traditional way by a tāyammā, but there are two accounts related to the nirvanam practice that I found especially interesting. One is told by an eighty-four-year-old tirunangai from Chennai, for whom no name is given but rather her occupation – *pūkkāra āyā*, a flower-vending old lady.[176] She criticizes what she considers to be the new practices imported from Mumbai and in general finds the practices of tirunangais in Tamil Nadu less stringent. For the nirvāṇam she says:

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[173] Two chapters of the book are devoted to the nirvāṇam and the journey back to Mumbai (Rēvati, Veḷḷai moḻi, chapters 6 and 7; Revathi, The Truth about Me, chapters 8 and 9).
[174] Living Smile Vidya, *Nāṉ, Vityā*, 13.
[175] oru kasāppuk kaṭaikkuḷ nuḻaivataip pōlavē iruntatu (Ibid., 16).
[176] pūkkāra āyā (Rēvati, Uṇarvum uruvamum, 83).

> It is their [novice tirunangais'] wish to do the nirvāṇam. No one is going to force them. It is only nowadays that people do it thinking that it is necessary. We weren't like that in our time. What god gave us has to stay that way and you shouldn't cut it off. Everything is in the mind. It makes no sense thinking that you're a tirunangai if you only change your clothes and do the nirvāṇam. I live in the body that was given to me. You are a tirunangai whether you're castrated or not.[177]

While Judith Butler would probably have this philosophical tirunangai executed, if she were not dead already, for daring to insinuate that tirunangai gender is a biological given, and not an effect of reiterated acting and performing,[178] it is interesting to hear a perspective of an elderly tirunangai because it might suggest that some of the current tirunangai cultural and social practices seem to be relatively recent.

The other thought-provoking account is by a younger tirunangai by the name of Cūtā Centilkumār (Sudha Sentilkumar) who has not had the surgery performed, nor wishes to do it (several other interviewed tirunangais mention their not undergoing the surgery). She sees it as a remnant of the old tirunangai culture, which cannot be viable anymore in the days when tirunangais demand equal rights and regular employment, and she is especially critical of the tyranny of rigid hierarchy in tirunangai households.[179] I found this

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[177] nirvāṇam paṇṇikkaṟatu kūṭa avaṅkavaṅka iṭamtāṉ. yārum vaṟpuṟuttamāṭṭāṅka. iṉṉaikku tāṉ nirvāṇam paṇṇikkiṭṭu pompaḷaiyā irukkaṇumṉṉu ceyyaṟāṅka. eṅka kālattila nāṅka appaṭi illa. āṇṭavaṉ kuṭuttatu appaṭiyē irukkaṭṭum atai veṭṭakkūṭātuṉṉu viṭṭuṭṭōm. ellāttukkum maṉacutāṉ kāraṇam. tuṇiya māttikkiṭṭu nirvāṇam paṇṇikkiṭṭātāṉ poṭṭaiyiṉṉu arttamilla. eṉakku kuṭutta uruvattilayē nāṉ vāḻntukiṭṭu irukkiṟēṉ. aṟuttālum poṭṭaitāṉ aṟukkalaṉṉā poṭṭaitāṉ (Ibid., 84). She uses the term poṭṭai (sissy) for tirunaṅkais which is nowadays considered to be politically incorrect.

[178] I am referring here, of course, to the famous theorist Judith Butler known for her work on gender performativity. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2011).

[179] Rēvati, *Uṇarvum uruvamum*, 99-100.

tirunangai's diatribe pertinent because while studying the texts under consideration here I noticed that the nirvanam can also be understood as a method of psychological and economical managing of the novice tirunangais by the senior ones. Young tirunangais often have no or very little money and entirely depend on their gurus for their livelihood. Gurus employ them as beggars or sex workers and make money through them. Losing their chelas is a financial risk for the gurus, who thus often manipulate chelas by promising the castration surgery in some near future. Often young tirunangais have to work for years before they are given a chance to have the surgery performed.

Verbal and physical abuse is part of everyday life for most tirunangais, and is especially wounding at the young age when shame attaches more easily. In regard to tirunangais, the most common Tamil terms of abuse are *oṉpatu* (lit. number nine),[180] *poṭṭai* (sissy),[181] and *ali* (neuter/eunuch). Verbal abuse, being called names, is one of the most insidious methods for undermining a person's sense of self and identity, and is a continuous source of trauma for many queer people. Words like *ali* and *oṉpatu* impart a sense of otherness, oddness, non-humanness, and estrangement, and are particularly offending and hurtful.

In the afterword to Revathi's *Uṇarvum uruvamum* the novelist Perumal Murugan draws our attention to the fact that the *Tolkāppiyam*, the earliest Tamil grammatical and

[180] I could not find a solid explanation for this term which seems to be used only in South India because I have not found it in the literature on transgender people in other parts of India. Some of the explanations that I heard informally are: 1. The sign for the numeral 9 when turned becomes 6 suggesting that tirunaṅkais are neither male nor female; 2. Tamil was originally an octal system (8-base) considering that the word for number 9 literally means 'one [less than] ten.' This would imply that just like the number 9 tirunaṅkais lack something, that they are incomplete somehow; 3. On Indian Census forms, multiple choice questions have numerical bullets for enumerating answer choices. As a standard practice, option 9 was reserved for 'Others' followed by a descriptive response. The 'Others' was enumerated as '9' for all questions including gender. Therefore, a transgender person would check option 9 for gender. This seems like the most likely explanation and I am in the process of checking it up.

[181] Most likely a colloquial variant of *peṭṭai* - female (of certain animals and birds); young girl [Pavoorchatram Rajagopal Subramanian, ed., *Kriyāviṉ Taṟkālat Tamiḻ Akarāti: Tamiḻ-Tamiḻ-Āṅkilam*, 1st ed., rept. with corrections (Madras: Kriyā, 1992)].

aesthetic treatise, assigned the status of *uyar tiṇai* (living beings with a gender marker as grammatically masculine or feminine) to transgender persons, while the later grammatical work *Naṉṉul* changed this into *aḫṛiṇai* (non-living object with no gender marker and therefore referred to by the demonstrative pronoun *atu*, 'that').[182] This observation is crucial in tracing the genealogy of gender and sexuality in the Tamil context.

"Queer" is, Eve Sedgwick argues, a word "fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement,"[183] that it can never only denote. This is why it is so particularly relevant that the Tamil transgender women created new terminology for their self-identification and denounced the derogatory terms such as *ali* and *oṉpatu*.

Revathi remembers being called all these names and, moreover, being physically punished by her teachers for behaving and talking in a way that was deemed inappropriate for her assigned gender. For example, one teacher beat her up with a stick for not behaving more bravely like the other boys, and a gym teacher forced her to take off her pants to check whether she is a boy a or girl to the uproarious amusement of everyone present.[184] Insults would hurt even when not addressed directly. For example, on the bus from her village to Namakkal she would often hear college students ask each other for the time to which the reply would be "nine o'clock," or she would hear them talking about whether it is possible to like the bus number nine.[185]

Smiley recounts particularly cruel wordplays that made her life in school intolerable. Students in her class would very often write on the blackboard *Caravaṇaṉ paṭippali* or *Caravaṇaṉ uḻaippali*, intentionally misspelling the second word, instead of

[182] Rēvati, Uṇarvum uruvamum, 113.
[183] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Tendencies (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 1993): 9.
[184] Revathi, *The Truth about Me*, 7; Rēvati, *Veḷḷai moḻi: aravāṉiyiṉ taṉvaralāṟu*, 8.
[185] Rēvati, *Veḷḷai moḻi*, 109-110.

Caravaṇaṉ paṭippāḷi and *Caravaṇaṉ uḻaippāḷi,* meaning ‘Saravanan is a learned person’ and ‘Saravanan is a hard-working’ person respectively. The pun is obviously on the last part of the word (*-ali* instead of *āḷi*) transforming the original meaning into something that could be translated as ‘Saravanan is a learned eunuch’ or ‘Saravanan is an industrious eunuch.’ And when Smiley would run to wipe these words off the blackboard the other students would shout *nalla ali* (‘good *ali* [derogatory for tirunangai]) instead of *nallā aḻi* (‘wipe well’).[186]

According to the memoirs in question, insult words are not the only way to abuse transgender people. Sometimes it suffices to single them out and point to their oddness. A particularly “creative” (read ‘cruel’) example of this can be found in Revathi’s *Uṇarvum uruvamum*. Aruṇā, who was the best student in her class, remembers an episode when she was insulted in class by her chemistry teacher:

> One day the chemistry teacher taught a lesson on metals and alloys. “Iron is a metal. It is heavy. An alloy will seem like iron, but it is not heavy. Its shape is irregular. It doesn’t have a specific shape. As an example of it, look at that boy sitting here.” He pointed toward me. “He looks like a boy but behaves like a girl.” Everyone in the class laughed. I felt ashamed.[187]

The above examples are fascinating to me because they demonstrate how language acquires aspects of gender and other “cultural constructs” even in those cases when the connection does not seem readily apparent. This is also, unfortunately, an example of how

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[186] Living Smile Vidya, *Nāṉ, Vityā*, 38.

[187] oru nāḷ vētiyiyal pāṭattila ulōkam, alōkam patti pāṭam naṭattiṉāru vāttiyāru. appō, “ulōkamṉṉā, irumpu. kaṉamā irukkum. alōkamṉṉā irumpu mātiri irukkum, āṉā kaṉam irukkātu. atu oḻuṅkaṟṟa oru uruvam. kuṟippiṭṭa oru uruvattōṭu irukkātu. atukku eṭuttukkāṭṭu eṉṉāṉṉu keṭṭā iṅka uṭkārntirukkiṟāṉ pāruṅka”ṉṉu colli eṉṉaik kāṭṭiṉāru. “ivaṉ āmpuḷamātiri irukkiṟāṉ āṉā naṭavaṭikkai pompaḷa mātiri irukku”ṉṉu soṉṉāru. kiḷāsla ellārum ciriccaṅka. enakku rompa avamāṉamā pōcci (Rēvati, Uṇarvum Uruvamum, 20).

social oppression can be inscribed into language, and thus become a source of a person's trauma; the shadow of anxiety about potentially being shamed that can attach to words (shame is an immensely contagious affect, Sedgwick reminds us[188]), is a proof of this connection. For Revathi, thus, a time of day or bus number can acquire dimensions of her shame and oppression if they are articulated using the word for number nine, *oṉpatu*. For Smiley, even a commonly used verb (*aḻi*, 'wipe') – a linguistic sign for a gesture performed every day – can take on sinister and insidious aspects, the consequence of what Cvetkovich refers to as "everyday trauma."

For many tirunangais their own families are often nests of the most dreadful ostracism, derision, betrayal and abandonment, which, as I have argued earlier is unique for tirunangais among other marginalized groups such as Dalits and Adivasis. Revathi describes her complicated relationship with her parents in many passages of her memoir. From the initial beatings and insults by her parents and brothers to later fights among the siblings over the parents' property, Revathi constantly has to prove herself to her family. Finally, she dedicates her book to her "mother who gave birth to her as a tirunangai,"[189] a woman who silently stood while her brothers beat her with an iron stick and abused her with the derogatory words discussed above. Towards the end of their lives her parents seemed to have accepted her, but it is hard to discern the truth of that considering that Revathi financially supported them. Unlike Revathi, Vanitā openly and succinctly explains the troubled relationship that many transgender people have with their parents:

> How many [tirunangais] leave their parents and siblings and live away from them! And if in some families they accept them as tirunangais they expect

[188] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2003: 36-7

[189] eṉṉai aravāṇiyākap peṟṟeṭutta eṉ tāykku (Rēvati, Veḷḷai moḻi, 5).

> money from them. As long as there is money coming in, brothers and sisters will show kindness. But even while taking it [the money] some [families] will insult us: "You're a *poṭṭai*, aren't you, how did you make this money?" How many times have I seen and heard of similar things![190]

Many tirunangais fare much worse in the relationship with their families. In *uṇarvum uruvamum,* a tirunangai called Cuntarī tells us that her family would constantly tell her to be like a man, and complain of the shame they felt when others called her *oṉpatu*. Often they would just tell her to die. When Cuntarī was thirteen she tried to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills. She survived, but her parents put her far away in a hostel where she stayed for four years being exploited by the hostel manager and not seeing her parents once.[191] Cūtā Centilkumār is another tirunangai who has a tragic story about her family. For years her father and brothers would regularly offer her poison while her mother was away from the house, encouraging her to kill herself. One day she did take it, but was luckily saved by her grandmother who took her to a hospital.[192]

The state of Tamil Nadu has for some tirunangais been a better mother than their own, but tirunagais still have a very complicated relationship with it. In May 2008, due to the efforts of THAA (Tamilnadu Aravanigal Association) and its founder and president, tirunangai Aasha Bharathi, Tamil Nadu became the first state in India to allow its transgender citizens to officially declare their third-gender identification on ration cards

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[190] Ammā, appā, tampi, taṅkacci ippaṭi kuṭumpattaviṭṭu evvaḷavō aravāṉiṅka veḷiyila irukkiṟāṅka. Oru cila kuṭumpaṅkaḷḷa aravāṉiṅkaṉṉu teriñci cettukkiṭṭālum avaṅkakiṭṭa iruntu paṇattatāṉ etirppārkkiṟāṅka. Paṇam varṟavaraikkum aṇṇaṉō akkāvō nallā aṉpu kāṭṭuvāṅka. vāṅkikkiṭṭu anta nērattilēyē kēvalamā pēcuvāṅka, "nī poṭṭatāṉē eppaṭi campāticcē?" ṉṉu kēppāṅka. itupōla ettaṉaiyō vicayaṅkaḷa eṉ kātāla kēṭṭirukkēṉ. kaṇṇāla pārttirukkēṉ.

[191] Rēvati, Uṇarvum Uruvamum, 15-16.

[192] Ibid., 28.

enabling them to avail of government welfare schemes. In April 2014, the Supreme Court of India created the "third gender" status for Indian transgender people, which was a revolutionary decision because previously they had to identify as either male or female on all official documents.[193] While it still remains to be seen how the actual implementation of these legislative changes will exactly transpire, this recent progress should certainly be congratulated considering that until very recently most Indian transgender people had no documents and therefore no right of ownership. Revathi tells her own story in regard to this issue, and documents similar ones in her *Uṇarvum uruvamum*.

At some point – Revathi is very thrifty with providing dates in her memoir – Revathi tried to get a driving license for her scooter in the name of Revathi and not Duraisami. She manages to get her ration card and her insurance documents in the name of Revathi, as she was duly instructed, but the inspector still refuses to issue her the driver's license. Eventually, she threatened that she would talk to the media about it, which frightened them, and she got her driver's license issued. However, she had to pay much more money for it than any other person (2,000 Rs instead of 150 Rs) and it did not specify her gender; it circuitously stated "Revathi who is Duraisami."[194]

Particularly interesting are the cases when for the sake of legal matters tirunangais had to perform maleness in order to have their issues solved. For example, Revathi's brothers tried to discredit her legal right to her father's property by claiming that she was some random *poṭṭai*. Her father hires a lawyer who says that the problem can easily be solved, if matters came that far, by Revathi's coming to court wearing a male suite. This is

[193] "Supreme Court Recognizes Transgenders as 'Third Gender,'" The Times of India, accessed December 15, 2014, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Supreme-Court-recognizes-transgenders-as-third-gender/articleshow/33767900.cms.
[194] rēvati eṅkiṟa turaisāmī (Rēvati, *Veḷḷai moḻi*, 196).

unacceptable to Revathi who finds it degrading and in an angry outburst defends her point of view:

> In order to become a woman, I had to suffer difficulties, I got beaten and teased by everyone, I had to grow my hair and now I am a woman. I even cut of my penis not fearing for my life, ready to die if I could live as a woman even for one day. Now, I have dressed into a man for the sake of property? Cut off my hair? No, I will not stand it![195]

The case was finally settled out of court. But even then, in order to get her fair share of money, and every time later when she withdrew money from the bank she had to sign as Duraisami. And it pained her. Tēvi's story in *Uṇarvum Uruvamum* is more tragic. Even thirteen years after her nirvanam was performed she would come to her parents' house in a lungi and shirt, and wearing short hair for fear of losing her parents' property if she wore women's clothes. And then she eventually found out that her father had written off the house to her brother. She filed a case in court to fight for the house and land, and until she gets it she will remain wearing men's clothes.

To sum up, I suggested that we read and interpret Revathi's and Smiley's books as, both, an instance of queer performativity negotiating inescapably painful memories of shame and stigma, but also as an example of testimonial writing in the function of social activism. *Uṇarvum uruvamum* can be read as a piece of collective autobiographical writing that has urgency of a testimonio. In contrast, in their memoirs, Revathi and Smiley essentially rework their reality in order to make it tolerable by digging into the recesses of

[195] pompaḷaiyā ākaṇumṉṉu kaṣṭaṅkaḷait tāṅki ota vāṅki aṭi vāṅkik kaṇṭa kaṇṭavaṉiṭam ellām tiṭṭu vāṅki muṭiya vaḷattu iṉikkup pompaḷaiyā irukkēṉ. eṉṉōṭa āṇ uṟuppaik kūṭa, payam illāma uyirē pōṉālum paravāyillai eṉṟu oru nāḷ vāḻntālum pompaḷaiyā vāḻntu cavōṉumṉu aruttukkiṭṭēṉ. ippō kēvalam cottukkāka nāṉ āmpaḷaiyā māṟōṉumā? eṉ talaimuṭiyai veṭṭōṉumā? illai, eṉṉāla atu ākātu (Ibid., 148).

her mind, salvaging memories, and rewriting them persistently and obsessively. What, at last, emerges from this compulsive activity is a queer confessional that is affectively structured around shame and trauma. In conclusion, Revathi and Smiley daringly defy trauma by verbally performing their queer shame and ultimately transforming it into a therapeutic experience – a medicine for their own heart.

Chapter 3: Their Own Ethnography: Priya Babu's *Aravāṉikaḷ Camūka Varaiviyal*

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I read an ethnography of Tamil transgender women (*Aravāṇikaḷ, camūka varaiviyal*, 2007), written by Priya Babu, Tamil transgender activist, as another type of self-narrative representation by tirunangais. More specifically, I take this text to be the most fully realized "representational contract,"[196] of all the tirunangai texts I have read for this dissertation because Priya Babu uses the greatest oppressor of all, an alien epistemological system (in the form of ethnography as a genre), to claim the privilege of nomenclature and definitions of all things tirunangai. By taking the genre of ethnography into her own hands, Priya Babu effectively strikes against the criminalizing and oppressive anthropological discourses employed by the British colonial administrators in the nineteenth century, that have persisted as the principal impediments to genuine progress in postcolonial times. Priya, strategically, shifts the definition of who transgender women are, from the biological one (absence of the male organ) to the psychological one ("feeling like a woman"), while also underscoring her community's sense of solidarity due to shared experiences of trauma and oppression. Her goal is eliminating societal stereotypes focusing on castration and supposed deviant sexual behavior by showing to mainstream society that her community has all the cultural elements as any other Indian religious or ethnic community, and that therefore tirunangais can and must join the ranks of mainstream society as rightful citizens.

Beside the first Tamil transgender novel, Revathi's autobiography, and, of course, the Koovagam festival – topics that first caught my attention in the study of Tamil

[196] Ibid.

transgender women – I have also been aware from the very start of my research, of a literature in Tamil comprising mostly of compilations of articles and essays by Tamil scholars, writers, activists and other public figures.[197] Even though I found this textual corpus informative and fascinating in its own right, I was suspicious of its, mostly male, authors speaking for the tirunangai community.[198]

Priya's ethnographic study thus proved to be a great discovery for providing an insight into, and a unique articulation of what she terms *aravāṉi camūkam*, that is, tirunangai society. 'Discovery' is perhaps not the right word for I have known of this publication from very early on in my research. I did not, however, think much of it earlier since I was mostly looking at works of fiction by tirunangais. It was not until the study of Revathi's and Living Smile Vidya's autobiographies that I realized the salience of first-person expression for persons existing at the margins of society, with almost no recorded history and problematic identity.

In the United States too, the past several years have been unprecedented considering a new awareness about and visibility of transgender people in many dimensions of mainstream society. From the actress Laverne Cox starring in the Netflix hit series *Orange Is the New Black*, over the director and writer Lana Wachowski and Cher's trans son Chaz

[197] Some titles, for example, are: Makārācaṉ, ed. *Aravāṇikaḷ: uṭaliyal, uḷaviyal, vāḻviyal*. Cheṉṉai [India]: Tōḻamai Veḷiyīṭu, 2007; Mukilai Irācapāṇṭiyaṉ, and Ki. Ayyappaṉ, eds. *Camūka Varalāṟṟil Aravāṇikaḷ*. Villupuram: Visalatchumi Pathippakkam, 2013; Ki. Ayyappaṉ. *Aravāṇikaḷ Aṉṟum Iṉṟum*. Villupuram: Visalatchumi Pathippakkam, 2011; and Mu. Aruṇācalam. *Tamiḻ Ilakkiyaṅkaḷil Aravāṇikaḷ*. Tiṇṭukkal: Aruṇ Paṗḷikēṣaṉs, 2011.

[198] This is also probably so because of my suspicion that in some cases interest in Tirunangais is of sexual nature.

Bono, to the omnipresent Caitlyn Jenner who underwent almost every step of her coming out and reassignment surgery publicly as part of the Kardashian reality TV universe, there has been no dearth of transgender individuals in the American public arena. However, it was the transgender model Geena Rocero who, in her extremely well-followed TED talk, that reminded me again of the centrality of owning one's narrative in the process of recognizing transgender individuals as fellow human beings and citizens.

Geena worked for over a decade in a very successful model career without telling anyone in the industry that she was in fact born as a boy. In an interview for the radio show *TED Radio Hour*, Geena describes her paranoia of being discovered and outed by someone else in the following words: "There's nothing worse than being outed. There's nothing worse than people taking control of your narrative."[199] In Geena's case, it was not only the fear of losing her lucrative modeling career that perpetuated her paranoia-ridden status quo, but even more so the fear of being publicly shamed, especially since the modeling career was in a way a confirmation of her womanhood.[200]

So it is shame that brings me again to first-person expressivity as the only possible outlet in the symbiotic liaison between shame and performativity, if we can recall Eve Sedgwick's keen theorizing on the relationship between queer identity and shame. If shame

[199] http://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/how-do-you-reveal-life-changing-transformation

[200] Geena explains: "So when I became a fashion model, I felt that I'd finally achieved the dream that I'd always wanted since I was a young child. My outside self finally matched my inner truth, my inner self… when I look at this picture [pointing to the fashion shot of her wearying a bikini], at that time I felt like, Geena, you've done it, you've made it, you have arrived." https://www.ted.com/talks/geena_rocero_why_i_must_come_out/transcript?language=en

produces performance as a remedy for the "inability to effectively arouse the other person's positive reactions to one's communications,"[201] and as a weapon against humiliation, then first-person expressivity must be seen as the essential characteristic in the process of destigmatizing transgender people and we should give it our full attention. Priya Babu very clearly addresses the issue of the need for modifying the fact of the tirunangai narrative belonging to non-tirunangais, as we will see shortly after I introduce Priya and her book.

I met Priya Babu through the National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) located in Chennai, with which she collaborated for her ethnographic research, and with which I was affiliated for the purpose of my Indian research visa. Priya did not live in Chennai at the time, and furthermore traveled quite frequently, so it was difficult to schedule a meeting with her. Thanks to the promptness of Vinodh Prem Dhas, an energetic and cordial NFSC program officer, and the NFSC director Dr. M. D. Muthukumaraswamy, I managed to meet Ms. Babu on September 14, 2013, a month after I had arrived in Chennai to commence my fieldwork.

After a phone conversation, Priya and I agreed to meet at the small apartment I was renting in the busy Kilpauk neighborhood of Chennai. She arrived thirty minutes late but she profusely apologized. In her light teal sari decorated with simple yet large off-white prints of flowers, and her still wet hair from the shower, Priya looked youthful and perfectly at ease.[202] Always smiling, Priya wasted no time on formalities and gladly started chatting

[201] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003): 37.
[202] She must have been in her mid-forties then.

in a spoken mixture of Tamil and English. At the time, most of my conversation with her revolved around my interest in her other publication, the novel *Mūṉṟām pāliṉ mukam* ['the face of the third gender'], which was reflected in my questions.

After a little bit less than an hour, Priya announced that she had to leave, but before she took off she made an elaborate *ācīrvātam* ['blessing'], by placing her right hand above my hand and muttering some words that I could not understand. Bharathi Kannamma, one of the senior *tirunangais* in Madurai, had performed a similar blessing when I had met her in March earlier that year. In both cases I was surprised by the unexpected gesture but also immediately delighted by the special attention I received. After all, it is widely believed that tirunangais have the power to bless and curse.[203]

Born as a boy in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Priya Babu – whose family hails from a village close to Tiruchirappalli in central Tamil Nadu – emigrated to India in 1974. She studied till the twelfth grade (high school graduation) in Mumbai and Chennai experiencing many difficulties as a person whose inner self did not correspond to the gender assigned at birth. In 1998 she underwent castration surgery and, in her own words, became a woman.[204] In the short biography found at the beginning of her ethnography *Aravāṇikaḷ, camūka varaiviyal,* she is described as:

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[203] See Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 13; Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Wadsworth Modern Anthropology Library (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co, 1990): xviii, 1, and so on. For transgender priests in ancient Greco-Roman and Middle-Eastern cultures see Roscoe, Will. "Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion." *History of Religions* 35, no. 3 (February 1, 1996): 195–230.

[204] "1998il aṟuvai cikiccai mūlam taṉṉaip peṇṇāka māṟṟik koṇṭār." (Priya Babu. *Mūṉṟām Pāliṉ Mukam*. Chennai: Cantiyā Patippakam, 2008: 5).

> "a female person [*maṉuṣi*] promoting the voice of the aravāṉis who have been betrayed by their deceitful nature and the patriarchal [*āṇātikka*] society; a living and kicking activist who started doing social work for transgender women in 1997 in Mumbai; she has been among the Chennai aravāṉis since 2001 constantly working in the mainstream society for the betterment (*mēmpāṭṭiṟkāka*) of aravāṉis."[205]

In 2007, Priya Babu's collaboration with the Chennai-based National Folklore Support Center resulted in the publication of her ethnography, under scrutiny in this chapter, and a thirty-nine-minute documentary *Folklore of the Transgender Community of Tamil Nadu*, also known under its Tamil title as *Aravāṉikaḷiṉ vāḻkkaiyum vaḻakkāṟukaḷum* ['Aravāṉis' life and customs'].[206]

In an interview for *Frontline*, a fortnightly English language magazine of the Hindu Group of publications from Chennai, from December 2009, Priya Babu mentions going through "the ethnographic studies of the Narikoravar and Parathavar communities"[207] prior to her research of the folklore of Tamil transgender women. Priya's interest in these two communities – the Narikkuṟavar being the indigenous community often associated with poverty and crime, and the Paravar community of low-caste fishermen – illustrates again

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[205] "Piriyāpāpu iyaṟkaiyiṉ vañcakattālum, āṇātikkap potu veḷic camūkattālum vañcikkappaṭṭa aravāṉikaḷiṉ kuralai muṉṉeṭukkum maṉuṣi. Vāḻntukāṭṭa tuṭikkum ceyaṟpāṭṭāḷar; 1997il mumpaiyil aravāṉikaḷukkāṉa camūkappaṇiyai toṭaṅkiyavar. 2001il ceṉṉai vantu aravāṉikaḷ mattiyilum avarkaḷiṉ mēmpāṭṭiṟkāka potuveḷic camūkattilum toṭarntu iyaṅkiyavar." (Piriyā Pāpu. *Aravāṇikaḷ, camūka varaiviyal*. Chennai: Teṉticai, 2007: 3)

[206] Priya Babu. *Folklore of the Transgender Community in Tamil Nadu*. National Folklore Support Centre, 2007.

[207] http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2626/stories/20100101262610000.htm

the interest of tirunangai leaders to integrate their struggle with that of other oppressed people. We have seen already a similar case in Revathi's autobiography which was greatly inspired by the autobiographical novel *Karukku* by the Tamil Christian female writer Bama Faustina, more commonly known as Bama. Most succinctly put, *Karukku* is a story of a Dalit woman who leaves her convent in small-town India in order to escape the caste oppression therein.[208]

It is also worth mentioning here that *Karukku*, as a work by Dalits about Dalits, perfectly exemplifies a particular philosophy prevalent among many of the Dalit leaders and thinkers, namely, that literature about Dalits should be written only by Dalits themselves, and not by others, especially not by those from upper castes. Furthermore, these Dalit writers specifically rejected sympathy as a rhetorical trope in the portrayals of disadvantaged groups such as Dalits, even if this portrayal was boosting and sympathetic. The reason for refusing sympathy from others is the belief that even sympathy entrenches their position of dependence.[209] This attitude demonstrates a particularly distrustful reaction to outside social groups, the elements of which, surely can be detected in Priya

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[208] *Dalit* is a common South Asian term encompassing various groups considered to be outside the four-tier orthodox Hindu *varṇa* system –

[209] In an essay in memory of the great Kannada and Indian literary theorist and social critic Doddaballapur Ramaiah Nagaraj, Ashis Andy, articulates this in the following words: "The dispossessed and the disempowered, in Nagaraj's world, give you no scope for pity and have little patience with your sympathy. There is in them a robust, almost fierce, self-confidence that emerges neither from modern individualism nor the demystification of traditions which are supposed to be the engines of social change in our part of the world. This is a confidence which comes from rediscovered meanings of cultural traditions and reworked ideas of collectivity." (Nagaraj, D. R., and Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi. *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*. Rev. and enl. 2nd ed. Ranikhet: Bangalore: Permanent Black; Distributed by Orient Blackswan, 2010: ix).

Babu's insistence that an ethnography of Tamil transgender women should, accordingly, be written by one as we shall see clearly articulated in the text.

INTRODUCTION

Priya Babu's introductory essay to her ethnography is de facto a manifesto declaring her intentions, motives and views, and urgently calling for a change concerning how transgender people are treated in Tamil society. In addition to this clear articulation of the book's goals, this introduction presents us a fascinating glimpse into how Priya conceptually frames her community in a larger world of Indian communities under the category of *iṉam*, a Tamil term whose semantic scope includes connotations such as 'subclass' (as in animal or plant kingdom), 'race,' 'ethnic group,' 'community,' and so on. In Priya's words:

> "Our Indian society has elements of uninterrupted culture beginning from the Indus Valley [Civilization]. Even though, in a long continuity, many time periods passed, the myths, rituals and roots of cultural elements of various communities have not been lost. Many communities became displaced due to [their] geographic surrounding or decentralization of [their local] political power, and evolved in new forms by joining the elements of their own culture with the culture of the new environment."[210]

[210] "*nam intiya camūkam cintuveḷi toṭaṅki iṉṟu varaiyilum aṟupaṭāta paṇpāṭṭuk kūṟukaḷaik koṇṭuḷḷatu. mika nīṇṭa toṭarcciyil palvēṟu kāla kaṭṭaṅkaḷai kaṭantālum pala camūkaṅkaḷ ataṉ toṉmaṅkaḷaiyum, caṭaṅkukaḷaiyum, paṇpāṭṭuk kūṟukaḷiṉ vērkaḷaiyum iḷantuviṭavillai.*" (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 9).

Priya is not afraid to paint a huge historical canvas as a background for the story of her community, which she variably calls *inam* or *camūkam* [‘society,’ ‘community’]. On this canvas, caste, communal and religious clashes, expansionist wars among kings, and foreign invasions influence new languages and start new religions. In Babu’s opinion, all communities have characteristics of being mixable and additive (*kalapputtaṉmaiyum kūṭṭuttaṉmaiyum*[211]), and due to these characteristics societies evolve. One among these communities is an aravāṇi community, as Priya calls it, and it is a community that should be known about (“*aṟiya vēṇṭiya camūkaṅkaḷil aravāṇi camūkam oṉṟu*”[212]). Priya urges us to know about her community because it “has its own society, traditional kinship structures, distinctive rituals, and an oral tradition.”[213]

The reason for the ostracizing of transgender people, Priya explains in her ethnographic study, is due to nature and patriarchy, or more literally “nature’s instruments and male-dominated mainstream society.”[214] Priya further informs us that the condition of tirunangais is even worse than of other traditionally oppressed groups, a view also echoed in her *Frontline* interview. According to her, “a Dalit in the village may escape humiliation if he migrates to a city, but transgender persons are harassed wherever they go.”[215]

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211 Idem., 10.

212 Idem.

213 “… *taṉakkāṉa oru camūkattaiyum pārampariya kūṭumpa amaippukaḷaiyum taṉittuvamāṉa caṭaṅkukaḷaiyum vāymoḻi marapukaḷaiyum koṇṭuḷḷatu inta aravāṇi camūkam*.” (Idem.)

214 “… *yaṟkaiyiṉ iyakkakūrukaḷālum āṇātikka potuveḷic camūkattālum*” (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 10).

215 http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2626/stories/20100101262610000.htm

Priya goes on to briefly talk about her HIV/AIDS prevention work among the transgender women of Mumbai and Chennai, and then expresses her worry that despite the immense help in the medical field, "*aravāṉis* have been upheld in the field of culture but not liked."[216] In the 1990s, HIV/AIDS project activities brought attention to the deplorable conditions of Tamil transgender women, and thus these project activities became a valuable platform where tirunangais, many of whom clashed with the police and law as sex workers, could raise their concern about their difficult lives. These activities mark the inception of transgender welfare activities by Non-Governmental Organizations due to the inertia of the Indian government.

In 1990, an important WHO study found that there were many more transgender and MSM (men who have sex with men) individuals than previously thought.[217] Some of them were involved in HIV prevention work and those later emerged as the community leaders. These job opportunities in HIV prevention work not only provided platform to express the skills that tirunangais could not express previously, but also induced harmonious socialization among them, and helped in setting future directions of the tirunangai community development. The outcome of the experience gained from this HIV-prevention work could be noted in the creation of tirunangai agencies such as the Tamil Nadu Aravanikal Association (THAA) founded by Asha Bharathi in 1998.[218]

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216 "… *camūkap paṇpāṭṭut taḷaṅkaḷil aravāṉikaḷai uyarttip piṭikkavillai.*" (idem.).

217 See Nambiar, Devaki. "HIV-Related Stigma and NGO-Isation in India: An Historico-Empirical Analysis." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 34, no. 5 (June 2012): 714–29.

218 http://www.infosem.org/thaa.htm

In the 1990s, the Aravaṉ festival starts drawing larger crowds of transgender women to the village of Koovagam, attracting in turn the interest of media and various scholars. According to Priya, many of these people started circulating wrong pieces of information about tirunangais and one of the reasons Priya writes this book is to correct these mistakes:

> "… those who do research on Aravanis, documentary filmmakers, college students, and progressive thinkers, not being able to get the right data about them combine fantasy with what little information they have and use them in their fields. I thought they reflected an incorrect view on this community. I turned my attention to correcting them."[219]

In 2005, by virtue of being funded by the National Folklore Research Centre (NFRC), Priya got a chance to work as a research coordinator on the research about the tirunangai rituals and life customs. She collected data about tirunangais' rituals, and videotaped the events in Koovagam and Villupuram during the tirunangai beauty contest, and released them as a documentary previously mentioned. Furthermore, at the beginning of 2007, through the Delhi-based Cultural Research Institute called Sarai, Priya received funding for conducting a six-month research in Madurai collecting various data on tirunangai rituals, arts, songs, and religious worship. The result of this research is this book

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[219] "*aravāṉikaḷ mītāṉa āyvukaḷ mēṟkoḷvōr, kuṟumpaṭam iyakkuvōr, kallūri māṇavamāṇaviyar, muṟpōkku cintaṉaiyāḷarkaḷ eṉa palatarappaṭṭavarkkum aravāṉikaḷ paṟṟiya niṟaivāṉa takavalkaḷ kiṭaikkāmal tavippataiyum, cilar avarkaḷukku kiṭaikkum cila takavalkaḷōṭu taṅkaḷ kaṟpaṉaikaḷaiyum kalantu tam tuṟaikaḷil payaṉpaṭutti vantaṉar. ivai iccamūkattiṉ mītāṉa tavaṟāṉa karuttai piratipalikkum eṉa uṇarntēṉ. ivaikaḷukkāṉa teḷivāṉa muṭivai nōkki eṉ kavaṉam tirumpiyatu.*" (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 10-11).

and Priya summarizes its importance in the following words: "I wrote this book as a duty to my community, with a goal that the data I collected may be understood by the mainstream public and that an opportunity might appear for reducing oppression in the aravāṉi community."[220]

Moreover, in the last paragraph of the chapter, amid many a thank you extended to the people who made her research and its subsequent publication possible, Priya also underlines the fact that she is the first tirunangai who has ever done this type of study and refers to herself as *mutal aravāṉi āyvāḷar* [the first aravāṉi research scholar].[221] If we remember, Revathi's *Uṇarvum uruvamum* came out in 2005, and even though she does not call herself an *āyvāḷar*, her work on collecting the life stories can certainly be considered scholarly-informed. Despite this fact, Revathi provides almost no interpretation of her collected material, the stories of the women she interviewed are certainly not organized in a haphazard manner. The titles and the structuring of her the book's subsections (for example, "Childhood and Schooling," followed by "Parents and Society," "Work Experiences," "Love and Family Life," "Nirvāṇam and the Milk Pouring Ceremony –

[220] "*Nāṉ cēkaritta takavalkaḷai potuveḷic camūkam purintu koṇṭāl aravāṉi camūkattiṉ mītāṉa oṭukkutalkaḷ kuṟaiya vāyppu uruvākalām eṉṟa nōkkattilum eṉ camūkattiṟkāṟṟum kaṭamaiyākavē innūlai eḻutiṉēṉ*." (Idem., 11).

[221] "eṉ mītu nampikkai koṇṭu aravāṉiyākiya eṉṉai mutal aravāṉi āyvāḷarāka uyarttiya tiru. Em. Muttukkumāracāmi (tēciya nāṭṭuppuṟaviyal utavi maiyam) avarkaḷukkum... naṉṟi kūṟukiṉṟēṉ." [I thank Dr. Muthukumaraswamy from the National Folklore Support Centre for trusting me and praising me as the first transgender research scholar.] (Idem. 11).

Goddess Worship") suggest a person familiar with the format of ethnographic studies as a genre.[222]

Perhaps, credit should be given to Priya for asserting that she is the "first aravāṉi researcher," if nothing than for her being aware of the importance of asserting it. But even though she is a *mutal āyvāḷar* – an occupational profile certainly new for a Tamil transgender woman – Priya leaves no room for doubt to think that transgender women are anything but new in *Tamiḻakam*, the land of Tamils. And what is even more salient is that by taking the genre of ethnography into her own hands, Priya Babu effectively strikes against the criminalizing and oppressive anthropological discourses employed by the British colonial administrators in the nineteenth century, that have persisted as the principal impediments to genuine progress in postcolonial times, as the following chapter illustrates.

FEELING LIKE A WOMAN…

Beside this one, all the other chapter titles in Priya's ethnography resemble to a large extent the ones in Revathi's *Uṇarvum uruvamum* – if not literally, then surely operationally in the sense that they address the customarily studied topics in cultural studies, anthropology and other related disciplines that have embraced ethnography as their favorite genre of scholarly writing. As presented in the book, they are: "The Origin Myth," "Language," "The Old Tradition," "Permanent Income," a chapter on tirunangai rituals, "Panchayat," "Mainstream Society and Us," "Tāyammā" (a traditional castration

[222] *kuḻantaipparuvamum paḷḷipparuvamum, peṟṟōr maṟṟum camutāyam, toḻil aṉupavaṅkaḷ, kātal maṟṟum kuṭumpa vāḻkkai, nirvāṇam maṟṟum pāl ūṟṟum viḻā – mātā pūjai*.

surgery/ritual expert), “The Antiquity of the Aravāṉ Cult,” “Male Companionship,” “Some True Stories,” “Music and Dance,” and “Habits Becoming Rituals”.[223] We shall see soon how these topics relate to a more specific type of an ethnography which was inherited from the British colonial administration and which has had long, profound and, unfortunately, sinister influence on post-Independence Indian society.

Among these chapter titles, then, “Peṇ uṇarvai uṇarntu…” [‘feeling a woman’s feelings’, ‘feeling like a woman’] is surely the most obscure one. The title made me believe this section would deal with the psychology of Tamil transgender women. The ellipsis sign at the end of the chapter title was also confusing. As I probed into the text, however, I realized that Priya Babu articulates here something truly salient for our understanding of the process of destigmatization of Tamil tirunangais in mainstream society. As we will see, Priya in this de facto first chapter of her ethnography charges against the previous anthropological classifications of transgender people in India and defines what *aravāṉikaḷ samūkam* [aravāṉi community] and aravāṉi mean, and this is expressed in the phrasing ‘feeling like a woman’.

In the very first sentence, Priya defines *oru camūkattiṉ camūka varaiviyal* [an ethnography of a community] as “a compilation of articles about the community’s unique

223 “*Peṇ uṇarvai uṇarntu*”, “*Tōṟṟat toṉmam*”, “*Moḻi*”, “*Marapu vaḻippaṭṭa paḻaiya pārampariyam*”, “*Nirantaramaṟṟa varumāṉam*”, “*Rīt mutal raṇṭappā varai*”, “*Caṭṭāy pañcāyattu*”, “*Potuveḷic camūkam nāṅkaḷum*”, “*Tāyammā*”, “*Aravāṉ vaḻipāṭṭiṉ toṉmai*”, “*Āṇtuṇai*”, “*Nijamāy cila kataikaḷ*”, “*Icaiyum nadaṉamum*”, and “*Caṭaṅkāy māṟiya paḻakkam*”.

history, distinct customs, and culture."[224] She laments the lack of written sources about her community but stresses that there is a large oral tradition that she collected during her research. As we have seen in her introductory essay, for Priya tirunangais are yet another *camūkam*, community, just one among many in Tamil society. Unlike others, though, this one is "specifically identified (*aṭaiyāḷam kāṇapaṭukiṉṟatu*) as a community made of those who became women for feeling like women and not like men even though they were born as men."[225] Priya thus asserts that, just like other social groups, hers too maintains and fosters a society with its own tradition and history, unique rituals, and oral traditions, but unlike others, the camūkam of tirunangais is unique "because they have different feelings from those of other groups, and because they united because of their psychological distress."[226] This must be seen as a new formulation of what tirunangais are as a social group as the following paragraphs will explain.

I have already pointed to the fact that Priya defines tirunangais variably as an *iṉam* or *camūkam* [race or community], just like any other found in society. It is curious that from her definition of 'aravāṉi', one gets a sense that they are not necessarily geographically or ethnically defined as Tamil, but more importantly, Priya also mentions that some communities "were counted as criminal tribes and repressed during the colonial

224 "Oru camūkattiṉ camūka varaiviyal eṉpatu antac camūkattiṉ taṉittuva varalāṟṟaiyum taṉittuvamāṉa valakkāṟukaḷaiyum paṇpāṭṭaiyum paṟaicāṟṟum ceyti tokuppākum." (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 12).

225 "Potu veḷic camūkattil uḷḷa aṉaittu iṉaṅkaḷilum āṇāy piṟantu uṇarvukaḷ māṟṟattāl peṇ uṇarvaip uṇarntu peṇṇākip pōkiṟavarkaḷ oṉṟu kūṭi uruvākkiya camūkam eṉṟē inta camūkam aṭaiyāḷam kāṇap paṭukiṉṟatu." [Among all the communities in mainstream society, this community is [exclusively- எஞ்சி] identified as a community of those who became women for feeling like women and not like men even though they were born as men.] (Idem.)

226 "Palvēṟu iṉakkuḻukaḷiruntu uṇarvu māṟṟattālum maṉōrītiyāṉa tuyarattiṉālum vilaki vantu..." (Idem., 13).

period" and that "after the Indian Independence, constitutionally many communities have been listed in terms of their economical standard, education and civilizational development."[227] By this Priya is not only pointing to the British colonial bureaucracy's obsession with various classifications of its subjects, but also to the insidious continuation of those practices well after India's freedom from colonial oppression in 1947.

Nicholas B. Dirks, an American anthropologist preoccupied with the British colonial discourse, in his scholarly essay on a hook-swinging "incident" in colonial Madras, reminds us that anthropology started in India as "colonial judgment" and that "the ethnographic survey itself was born directly out of the census, an important early apparatus of colonial rule."[228] Besides, according to him, much if not all ethnographic activity in Madras, and India in general, began with concerns about criminality.[229] Nomadic lifestyle was a special source of anxiety to the colonial authorities primarily concerned about keeping these dangerous classes under surveillance. Not surprisingly Indian transgender women were summarily filed under the "criminal castes" category, as Gayatri Reddy notes.[230]

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227 "… cila iṉaṅkaḷ kālaṉiaathikka kālattil kuṟṟapparamparaiyiṉar eṉak kaṇakkiṭappaṭṭu oṭukkappaṭṭaṉar. Intiya viṭutalaikkup piṉ intiya araciyalamaippu caṭṭattiṉpaṭi pala camūkaṅkaḷ avarkaḷiṉ poruḷātāram, kalvi, nākarīka vaḷarcciyiṉ aṭippaṭaiyil paṭṭiyaliṭappaṭṭaṉa." […some communities were counted as criminal tribes and repressed during the colonial period. After the Indian Independence, constitutionally many communities have been listed in terms of their economical standard, education and civilizational development.] (Ibid. 9).

228 Dirks, Nicholas B. "The Policing of Tradition: Colonialism and Anthropology in Southern India." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 1 (1997): 182–212: 209.

229 Ibid., 205.

230 Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005: 26.

The insidiousness of the British colonial intervention in India was in its association with Brahmans and other high-caste Hindus, which produced social and cultural categories that continue to "live on in India around the reconstituted categories of popular and elite religion, proper Hinduism, the priesthood, and in forms of civilizational defensiveness and pride".[231] In other words, the social determinism structured around the concerns of criminality and criminal behavior, over time changed into biological determinism by which criminal behavior started being understood in hereditary and even ethnic terms.

Bernard Cohn similarly notes the influence of the nineteenth-century British colonial view of caste on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British colonial anthropological activity, as well as the later, post-Independence Indian anthropology.[232] This view was very much linked to the census as the most cherished of all colonial systems of collecting information about Indian people, focusing on the measureable and concrete such as marriage rituals and practices, commensality rules, fixed occupation, common ritual practices, and so on.[233] As a result, in the ethnographic works – such as W. Crooke's *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, published in 1896 – much space is devoted to recording various castes' marriage rules, life-cycle rites, mythological origin stories, etc.

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[231] Dirks, "Politics of Tradition", 212.

[232] See Bernard Cohn, "Notes on the History of the Study of Indian Society and Culture," in *Perspectives on Modern South Asia: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representat*ion, ed. Kamala Visweswaran, 1 edition (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 52–67.

[233] Cohn, "Notes," 61.

Furthermore, the major shift from the nineteenth- to twentieth-century anthropological approaches by the British in India can be seen in the narrowing of focus from the bulk of the Indian population to, seemingly, only South Asian tribal populations.[234] This can perhaps explain – and this is, of course, sheer speculation – why I did not seriously consider studying Priya's text.[235] To be more specific, I always suspected that Priya's ethnography – and let us not forget that she carried out her ethnographic project in collaboration with the Chennai-based *National Folklore Support Centre* (NFSC) – would very much mimic the Tamil anthropological studies I had previously come across as a visitor to several Tamil universities' folklore departments in Madurai, Pondicherry, Thanjavur and Chennai. Releasing various publications on the language and customs of tribal communities always seemed to me like the prime activity of these centers, since their publications are often proudly showcased at these higher-education institutions. But what about the NFSC that Priya collaborated with?

The *National Folkore Support Center* is, in the words of its administrators, a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking, and publications."[236] The lore they have been primarily interested in has mostly been associated with that of tribal

[234] Ibid., 65.

[235] Upon rereading this, I realize that another simple explanation for my initial disregard of Priya Babu's text is entrenched in my latent orientalist tendencies due to which I tend to glorify western academic epistemai, while being suspicious of all others.

[236] http://indianfolklore.org/home.htm

communities, as their publications demonstrate.[237] Priya, as we have seen, speaks of being influenced by the ethnographies of the Narikurava and Paravar communities. Dr. Muthukumaraswamy, the NFSC director, was himself involved in the project of forming a digital archive documenting the habits and the cultures of the Narikuravars. This fifteen-minute film is a documentary "on the life and culture of a gypsy community called Narikuravar, settled in Villupuram, in the state of Tamilnadu in south India," as described on the NFSC website.[238]

This short documentary film primarily focuses on describing various difficulties the Narikurava community experiences in Tamil Nadu, having been "settled" in various locations by the government with their traditional skills such as bird snaring and fortunetelling not being viable survival tools in the increasingly urbanized state of Tamil Nadu. The film records these issues, but it also singles out the Narikuravar's devotion to the goddess Kālī and her festival as the community's prime example of their folklore.[239] We will observe a similar pattern with Priya's documentary film which was part of the research she did in collaboration with the NFSC.

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[237] Their most recent publications are dictionaries of the Narikurava (Tamil Nadu) and Jenukuruba (Karnataka) tribal communities, and an ethnography of the Seraikela community of Jharkhand and their *Chhau* dance form.

[238] See http://wiki.indianfolklore.org/index.php?title=Digital_Community_Archive_in_Tamil_Nadu.

[239] The film was made by Alex K. Rayson, currently an assistant professor at Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani, K. K. Birla Goa Campus. A cursory look at his ethnographic work shows that he has been entirely preoccupied with the so called tribal communities (*Narikurava* in Tamil Nadu, *Jenukurubar* tribal community in Karnataka, tribes living along the river Nila in Kerala, and the *Mudugar* indigenous community of the Nilgiri hills in between Tamil Nadu and Kerala that Rayson researched for his PhD). See http://universe.bits-pilani.ac.in/goa/raysonalex/profile.

While describing the post-WWII anthropological stage in India, Cohn remarks that "[c]onsciously or unconsciously much of the research in the period 1945 to 1955 by social and cultural anthropologists was based on the assumptions developed over the previous 200 years as reflected by the anthropological thinking which developed during the 1930s and 1940s."[240] It is not surprising, then, to hear echoes – sometimes, in fact, very clear sounds and voices – of these older articulations of anthropological thinking, in Priya's ethnography as well. In other words, what I want to stress here is that the formal organization of Priya's ethnography and its language, clearly show its intellectual origins, and the fact that Priya is in an active and engaging dialogue with them, as the following paragraphs will demonstrate.

In Priya's ethnography I detect the aspects of both social and biological determinism that had such a troubled legacy in the postcolonial period. On the one hand Priya aligns the community of aravāṉis with the familiar stratification categories formed on the basis of religion and/or caste. In doing so Priya underlines the fact that her *iṉam* [social group] "has its own society, traditional kinship structures, distinctive rituals, and an oral tradition,"[241] resembling other castes, religious, ethnic and other minorities. On the other hand, Priya is troubled by the gender-/sex-related aspects inevitably involved in any definition of aravāṉi, or, more precisely, by the focus of Tamil mainstream society on tirunangais as sexual deviants because of the community's lack of sexual reproduction.

[240] Cohn, "Notes," 66-7.
[241] Priya Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 9.

Both these aspects – the *iṉam*-hood of tirunangais, as well mainstream society's focus on their lack of procreative powers – are, as I will shortly explain, yet another legacy of the above-described British systematic attempts to classify the staggeringly, and seemingly unmanageably, diverse population under its colonial administration in South Asia.

First, as Gayatri Reddy notes, transgender women hailing from various places in South Asia under the British rule were often listed as a distinct caste or community.[242] With the announcement of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, "eunuchs" were classified, and criminalized as described above, together with other communities that posed threat to the British imperial efforts. And second, this type of classifying was governed by the dictum that the term *eunuch*, to use the colonial phrasing, was "deemed to include all persons of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear to be impotent."[243] This category of people also included people who "are reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children" and those who "appear, dressed or ornamented like a woman, in a public street or place, or in any other place, with the intention of being seen from a public street or place,"[244] as well as those individuals who "dance or play music, or take part in any public exhibition, in a public street or place or for hire in a private house."[245] The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, began being implemented in the Northwest

[242] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 25.
[243] Ibid., 26.
[244] Ibid., 26.
[245] Ibid., 27.

Provinces, Awadh and Punjab, i.e. in the northern and northwestern parts of modern-day India, but it soon became applicable in other parts of India.

We can unmistakably notice that all these elements in the British classificatory definition of "eunuchs" point to their supposed physical and/or physiological anomalies, sartorial practices, and their proclivity to dancing and playing music. The focus is on the outward, observable and measurable, and, what is most imperative to note here, on the *lack* of their procreative powers. Priya addresses the latter at the very beginning of her introductory chapter, albeit in a manner that is not entirely straightforward: "Aravāṇikaḷ camūkam kuṟitta cariyāṉa ceytikaḷ illāmaikku kāraṇam inta camūkam marapurītiyāṉa iṉapperukkattiṉ aṭippaṭaiyilāṉa toṭarcci illāmal iruppatutāṉ" [The reason for the lack of correct data about the aravāṉi community is the lack of this community's traditional procreation.].[246]

With this statement, Priya is evidently acquainted with the colonial administrators' procedures of classifying "eunuchs" primarily along the lines of the British colonial preoccupation with castration practices. I was at first vexed with this sentence because Priya makes a huge argumentative leap here presupposing the reader's knowledge of this particular facet of the colonial legal and administrative system. In other words, I had no idea what she was referring to specifically, and guessed that it was a non sequitur, otherwise

[246] Ibid., 13.

not so uncommon in her rhetorical style. Now, I marvel at its *sūtra*-like[247] simplicity and the fact that, with this sentence, Priya aligns the marginalization of her people directly with the colonial classificatory myopia along the axis of sex, or, more precisely, the lack thereof.

Priya Babu, as a spokesperson of the tirunangai community, thus has a very important task at hand in the process of writing the first ethnography of her community as its member and representor. As I have underlined earlier, Priya does not take this task lightly because she wrote it "as a duty" [*kaṭamaiyākavē*] to her own people, to collect the information about her people's unique cultural tradition, previously unknown to the majority of mainstream society for the reasons explained earlier, which she perhaps not so clearly identifies. *And*, what is even more important for the scope of our wider study of tirunangais' self-articulation, the goal of this activity, Priya asserts is educating the general public, which could change the way transgender individuals are perceived in Tamil society, and consequently ameliorate their severely compromised living conditions.

Priya, evidently, has no problem identifying her community as an *iṉam* [social group, race, class of people], which is not that far removed from the colonial, and later modern-Indian understanding of tirunangais, *hijras*, and other groups of transgender people as a caste, especially a criminal or deviant one, or a tribe. I often like to think of Diane Mines' insightful ethnographic vignette from her textbook on caste, in which she describes how she discovered, in a Tamil village where she conducted her research, that she had been

[247] Here I refer to the old Indian tradition preserved in Sanskrit and other languages of codifying various bodies of knowledge into the so-called *sūtras*, skeletally short rules in the form of aphorisms that are often quite incomprehensible, even when translated, to the ones unfamiliar with that tradition.

assigned "Christian caste" by a friend in the village who collected census data for everyone in that area. When Mines tried to explain that she did not have a jāti, her friend, and others within earshot, exploded in laughter. Mines amusingly observes, that "[i]t turns out that claiming to have no *jati* is tantamount to claiming that you are no kind of thing in this universe at all!"[248] I have similarly felt on many occasions during my different stays in Tamil Nadu that the term "foreign," by which I would invariably be identified, meant much more than just not being physically and culturally from Tamil Nadu, and/or India. Or, similarly to Mines' example, I'd be forced to admit in conversations with friends and acquaintances that I was in fact *born* in a Catholic family regardless of the fact that I received no religious upbringing whatsoever, and that I vocally identified as atheist.

The problem, as I have already stressed is that Priya's community was identified and catalogued already in the nineteenth century as castrated, governed by the British concern with the lack of their genitalia, or potentially as dangerous because they supposedly kidnapped and castrated boys. Since this type of criminalization was evidently negative, Priya needs to find a new way of articulating the special physical innateness of tirunangais which is not related to their reproductive organs, as everyone, according to her, thinks. Hence, Priya Babu attempts here to switch the attention from the issues of gender and procreation to the psychological and thus she terms her community as the one "made of those who became women for feeling like women and not like men even though they

[248] Diane Mines, *Caste in India* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Association for Asian Studies, 2009): 1.

were born as men".[249] Priya also stresses that this community comes together because of the hardship and suffering that psychological distress of being born in the wrong body causes. The most comprehensive encapsulation of all these elements is found in Priya's following words: "This community maintains one society, unique rituals and an oral tradition because they came together and formed a new community due to the psychological distress caused by feeling differently from other social group."[250]

A similar statement is displayed on the back page of the book; next to an image of Priya chastely decorated in a simple light-blue sari, and her carefully combed hair heavily bedecked with clusters of white jasmine flowers, there is a square-shaped bubble with only one sentence: "Priya Babu identifies aravāṉis as those who were, among all races, born as men, yet for feeling like women, they became women."[251]

At last, I believe we need to understand the very act of writing an ethnography of an oppressed community by a member of the same as an act of regaining agency of expression that has normally been denied to it. Revathi, I suggested, with her ethnography attempted to collect the voices of her community. Moved by the stories in which she either recognized herself, or appalled by the atrocities unexperienced and unimagined even by

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[249] See fn. 32.

[250] "Palvēṟu iṉakkuḻukaḷiruntu uṇarvu māṟṟattālum maṉōrītiyāṉa tuyarattiṉālum vilaki vantu oruṅkiṇaintu putu camūkamāka uruvākiṉālum iccamūkam tamatu parāmpariyattai varalāṟṟōṭu oru camūkattaiyum, taṉittuvamāṉa caṭaṅkukaḷaiyum, vāymoḻi marapukaḷaiyum pēṇivarukiṟatu." (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 13-14).

[251] Potu veḷic camūkattil uḷḷa aṉaittu iṉaṅkaḷilum āṇāyp piṟantu uṇarvukaḷ māṟṟattāl peṇ uṇarvai uṇarntu peṉṉākippōṉa aravāṉikaḷai aṭaiyāḷappaṭuttukiṟār piriyā pāpu [Priya Babu defines aravāṉis as those who were, among all races, born as men, yet for feeling like women, they become women.].

her, Revathi assembles the life experience of other tirunangais, as narrated to her by them, and spiritedly conducts a choir of broken, yet marvelously harmonized voices.

Priya repeatedly stresses the lack of written sources for her community's history, but she also proudly asserts that despite this, hers is a society with its own unique culture even though it is oral [*vāymoḻi*]. Her mission, then, is to document the lore of various rituals, customs, and other formalized social events that have been of traditional concern to ethnographers in South Asia since the end of the nineteenth century. We can observe accordingly that Priya Babu is an archiver like Revathi. Even though Priya's archive is quite different, it is equally powerful, and, I argue, historically significant because of her insisting that this is the first ethnography written by a tirunangai. The fact of her declaring it – and, of course, the fact that this is the first such ethnography – is veritably taking the control over the classification and, consequently, identification of her community from the criminalizing and oppressive bureaucratic classification under the masque of anthropological endeavor into the hands of Tamil transgender women themselves.

Before she ends this introductory chapter to her ethnography, Priya briefly touches upon the association between tirunangais and the Koovagam festival, Islamic religious and cultural elements in certain tirunangai rituals and customs, as well as the matters of proper nomenclature for Tamil transgender women. Many tirunangais, Priya tells us, claim to be the avatar of god Krishna, as based on the story from the *Mahabharata*.[252] By this Priya

[252] "…makāpārata aravāṉ kataiyiṉpaṭi taṅkaḷai pakavāṉ kiruṣṇariṉ avatāram eṉakkūṟik koḷpavarkaḷ anēkar." [Many claim to be the avatar of god Krishna, based on the story of Aravāṉ from the Mahabharata.] (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 14).

refers to tirunangais' singular interpretation of the mythological material ritually re-enacted in the village of Koovagam during the annual Aravāṉ festival, as based on the fourteenth-century local Tamil versions of the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*.

According to Alf Hiltebeitel's study of the Aravāṉ cult, local male villagers who have been participating in this festival from at least the beginning of the twentieth century, and thus predating the massive participation of South Indian transgender women, perform the same rituals that tirunangais do.[253] They do not, however, identify with Mohinī, Krishna's avatar of a celestial seductress, but rather with Krishna himself for his essential role of assuring Aravāṉ's death and thus, consequently, the cyclical regeneration of nature and fulfillment of their vows to him to obtain whatever earthly goals they desire.[254] Tirunangais' interpretation and rearticulation of the Aravāṉ myth is thus novel and singular, and certainly reflecting the immediacy of their own lives. Thus for example some transgender women refer to Krishna/Mohinī as *ali avatāram*, [eunuch/transgender avatar] according to Hiltebeitel's informants.[255]

Priya further turns her attention to "northern India" where "during the Mohammedan invasion many aravāṉis got work at the courts of the Mohammedan rulers, at places such as harems, where they lived enjoying respect from others."[256] That Priya

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[253] Hiltebeitel, Alf. "Dying Before the Mahabharata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-Building for Aravan." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 447–73: 454.
[254] Ibid., 469.
[255] Ibid. 456.
[256] "Vāṭā intiya mukamatiyar paṭaiyeṭuppiṉ potu palvēṟu aravāṉikaḷ mukamatiya maṉṉarkaḷiṉ araṇmaṉaiyil paṇiyārṟiya kāraṇaṅkaḷālum antappura paṇiyāḷ cēvaikaḷ ceytu mika aṅkīkārattuṭaṉ vāḻntamaiyāl." (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 14).

calls these transgender persons "aravāṉi," regardless of the fact that they hail from places and time periods far removed from hers, points again to the fact that she imagines all transgender women of India as one *iṉam* [race].

Priya also mentions the custom of gifting a tirunangai a black gemstone [*kaṟuppu maṇi*] at the end of the forty-day post-surgery recovery. This could perhaps refer to a ring with a dark stone such as sapphire that symbolizes the Black Stone of Kaaba. In her study of transgender women living in the South Indian city of Hyderabad – locally known in that part of India as *hijras* – Gayatri Reddy dedicates two entire chapter to the religious identification of her informants. Reddy was surprised to find that despite the fact that *hijras* often hail from Hindu families, Hyderabadi *hijras* identify as Muslim (Musalmans).[257] While she notes that for *hijras* being Muslim means the practice of Islam (praying or saying *namaz*, pilgrimage to Mecca, Medina or Karbala, celebration of Muharram, burial practices, observance of holidays and festivals, dietary habits, etc.), rather than adhering to orthodox Quranic practice of Islam.

Reddy also notes that *hijras* assimilated a number of Hindu religious traditions into their practice of Islam.[258] A good example of religious syncretism practiced by the Hyderabadi transgender women is the series of rituals performed during the *nirvan*, or castration, surgery, which center on the worship of the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata. Here, I should underline that the cults of Bahuchara Mata and Aravāṉ, even though

[257] See Reddy, *With Respect*, chapter V (« "We Are All Musalmans Now" »).
[258] Ibid., 102-7.

nominally Hindu, were – before the large participation of transgender women, or, perhaps more correctly, before the mass media coverage of the Koovagam festival and its sudden and ubiquitous fame – small, regional, and "belonging" to entirely different, non-transgender, communities.

For example, we know in the case of the Koovagam festival that the Aravāṉ cult originated in the fourteenth century in the same mythological-political pool with its sibling cult of the goddess Draupadī, and that it was developed by specific groups of people, namely non-warrior castes with aspirations to become ones.[259] To them, following the medieval Tamil logic, Aravāṉ represented "a new martial spirit linked with devotion to the goddess and a dedication to royal superiors so noble and complete that he [was] willing to sacrifice himself painfully to the goddess for the victory of either side's kings."[260] To the local villagers, who still participate, albeit in smaller numbers than the tirunangais, Aravāṉ and his annual ritual sacrifice could symbolize the annual renovation of nature, as so many of Tamil village rituals observe, and have characteristics of a fertility cult. This is at least what Hiltebeitel thinks while contrasting the two major groups participating in the Koovagam festivities: transgender individuals and local villagers.[261]

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[259] See Hiltebeitel, Alf. "Dying Before the Mahabharata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-Building for Aravan." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 447–73.

[260] Ibid., 452.

[261] "What Aravāṉ sees is in fact these villager-devotees, who in completing their vows to marry him in their "women's guise," have, in their identification with Kṛṣṇa, enabled the war that he sees, and the vision it supplies, to take place. He is their loving and devoted sacrificial victim. From him, and their vows to him, they obtain whatever goods of the world they have sought: health, good crops, good business, good work, educational enhancement, sexual fertility, and other desiderata. In the death rites that follow, their husband-*vīraṉ* becomes an ancestor; and through the revival rites with Kālī, he returns to protect their villages" (Ibid., 469).

Priya is not wrong to assert that transgender women enjoyed some degree of respect at the court of Islamic rulers even though she does not offer practically any example to support this claim. We know from Gayatri Reddy's ethnography of Hyderabadi *hijras*, however, that senior *hijras* speak of the glory days under the patronage of the fabulously wealthy and influential Asaf Jahi Nizam dyanasty with its capital in Hyderabad, from the middle of the eighteenth till the middle of the twentieth century.[262] Reddy's own research of the historicity of this claim indisputably shows that the Nizams of Hyderabad were patrons of *badhai hijras* (Hindi-Urdu term for transgender women who engage in the "ritual" practices of singing and dancing for which they would collect a *badhai* [payment]).[263] Reddy also reviews literature on the role of eunuchs in other Islamic empires, ranging from the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt to the Mughal Empire in present-day India and Pakistan, which strongly supports Priya's claim that eunuchs were held in high regard at many Islamic rulers' courts.

Priya also informs us about some Muslim practices among the Tamil tirunangais. One, for example, is the custom of wearying a veil [*mukkāṭu*] during the adoption ceremony [*tattu caṭaṅku*].[264] This is illustrated in Priya's documentary *Folklore of the Transgender Community in Tamil Nadu*, carried out as part of her collaboration with the National Folklore Support Centre in 2007. The veil in question is not so much a separate veil, but rather a particular way of wearying a sari so that one end covers the face.

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[262] Reddy, *With Respect*, 83.
[263] Ibid., 116.
[264] Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 14.

In the film, we see a young transgender woman being guided around by other tirunangais helping her perform various details of the ritual, while her head is covered with one end of the green sari she is wearying, and topped with a brass vessel previously used in the ritual. It is only briefly removed from her face when the young tirunangai is brought in front of the image of the Bahuchara Mata – a village fertility goddess with the origin in distant Gujarat in northern India – who is considered by some Tamil transgender women to be their matron deity (pun intended), and who is especially relevant during the series of ritual worship tirunangais perform before and after castration surgical procedures. I will discuss in more depth how Priya describes tirunangais' religious identities and activities in the following paragraphs, as I go on analyzing the book's chapters.

"In the Tamil land, Aravanis have been referred to by many terms in literature and history;" with this sentence, Priya starts a paragraph illustrating the antiquity of transgender women in Tamil culture by identifying references to them in some of the most famous works of Classical Tamil literature, also known as Caṅkam or Sangam literature. In the *Tolkāppiyam*, the oldest and most prominent Tamil grammatical treatise with a very problematic dating,[265] transgender women are referred to as *pēṭi*.[266] Priya has an objection to its grammatical usage: while this particular part of the *Tolkāppiyam* does specifically mention transgender women, it also instructs that the verb used with it should be marked

265 The dating of this text, as well as the authorship has posed numerous problems to everyone attempting to situate this work into a single century or only one author.

266 "Tolkāppiyam ceyyuḷiyalil pēṭi eṉṟa col aravāṉikaḷai aṭaiyāḷappaṭuttukiṟatu." [In the part of the Tolkāppiyam dealing with poetry (c*eyyuḷiyal*) tirunaṅkais are referred to by the word pēṭi.]

for masculine gender.[267] Priya corrects this by suggesting that the proper grammatical agreement between *pēṭi* as the subject of a sentence with a predicate verb should be feminine, and not masculine.[268]

For this and all other examples, it should be noted, Priya does not provide exact, numbered, references, which made it impossible for me to check their veracity. However, she is not the only one underlining the fact that we can find such ancient references to transgender women in Tamil literary tradition. Virtually every Tamil author of any publication concerned with tirunangais tries (whether transgender herself, or not), in one way or another, to establish the fact that transgender women are nothing new in the Tamil cultural landscape. Among them, I find especially relevant an article written by the tirunangai author and activist Living Smile Vidya, which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter on transgender women in Tamil literature.

A very important detail to notice here is that Priya Babu's range and interpretation of the material purported to represent the evidence of transgender women in ancient Tamil history is very selective. As we have seen in the example from the *Tolkāppiyam*, the fact that transgender individuals were mentioned in some of the oldest extent literary texts in South India does not mean that they were necessarily discussed in the positive light. Indeed, as we will see later, most references to *pēṭis* and *alis*, as transgender women were most

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[268] "attuṭaṉ ivarkaḷai pēṭi vantāṉ eṉakkūralākātu, 'pēṭi vantāḷ' eṉakkūṟavēṇṭum eṉap peṇpāl peyar kuṟiyīṭṭukkuḷ aṭaikkiṉṟatu" [It is not proper to say: pēṭi vantāṉ (where "-āṉ" is a grammatical suffix denoting masculine gender), but it should be rather said 'pēṭi vantāḷ' (where "-āḷ" is a grammatical suffix denoting female gender).

often referred to in this stage of Tamil literary history, are quite negative. In fact, *pēṭis* are often evoked as examples of cowardly behavior. Not only does Priya Babu *not* refer to these instances but she also, at moments, chooses to be completely silent about the obvious negative connotations of material she selected.

For example, Priya does not mention the negative status ascribed to transgender women in the following lines by one of the poets who over the centuries carried the name Auvaiyār: "Being born human is rare; being born human, and not a hunchback, blind person, or a *pēṭu* [variant of *pēṭi*], at the time of birth, is rare."[269] Priya's comment on this is that Auvaiyar assigns words *pēṭu, pēṭi* to the status of a gender variant (*pāl nilait tiripu nilaikku*).[270] She has no nothing else to say to the fact that this line categorizes transgender women with other physically challenged people who cannot be called human.

Regarding the word *ali* – the word still used in Tamil pejoratively for transgender women, and until recently the only word commonly used for them (and by them) while not being a complete insult, such as *ompōtu* (and other spoken variants of *oṉpatu* - number

[269] "aritu māṉiṭarāy piṟattal aritu māṉiṭarāy piṟanta kālaiyum kūṉ kuruṭu pēṭu nīṅki piṟattal aritu." Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 14; my own translation. I should note that I translate *piṟanta kālaiyum* (born bull) as piṟanta kālaiyiṉ (born time; i.e time of birth) since all other sources have the latter version, and the former version does not make sense syntactically. Kamil Zvelebil, the great scholar of Tamil literature explains the problem of homonymous authorship in Tamil literature in the following words: "Another problem which is involved in the general question of dating and chronology of the early works is the fact that a number of literary personalities occur under one and the same name, and very many writers and editors have committed the mistake of regarding persons bearing identical name as identical people. Thus we have e.g. Auvaiyar who comes in the pre-Pallavan age of so-called *Cankam* literature; another Auvaiyar appears as a contemporarv of Cuntarar in the Pallava age; and a third Auvaiyar, the author of-the popular didactic works, appears in the later Chola age as a contemporary of Ottakkiittar" (Zvelebil, Kamil. *The Smile of Murugan on Tamil Literature of South India*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 1973: 26.)

[270] "Auvaiyār…pēṭu, pēṭi eṉṟa collai pāl nilait tiripu nilaikku cūṭṭukiṉṟār," (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 14).

nine)[271]- Priya does not mince her words and entirely censures the usage of the word as an appropriate and respectable Tamil term for transgender women. This reprehensible word (*mikak kēvalamāṉac col*), she says, has been in use for a very long time, and it is unknown how it was given to the community of transgender women by mainstream society.[272] The word *ali* nowadays indicates only transgender women, as the contemporary Tamil dictionary *Kriyāviṉ Taṟkālat Tamiḻ Akarāti*, also defines it: "person who cannot be said to be either man or woman" (*āṇ eṉṟō peṇ eṉṟō colla muṭiyāta napar*).[273]

Older, and historical, Tamil dictionaries, for example the University of Madras *Tamil Lexicon*, record a slightly more diverse usage of the word over the centuries in compound words such as *ali-y-eḻuttu, ali-maram,* and *ali-k-kirakam,*.[274] Thus *ali-y-eḻuttu* means the letter as being regarded as neither a vowel nor a consonant, *ali-maram* denotes a soft, pithy tree without core, whereas *ali-k-kirakam* refers to the planets Saturn and Mercury. We can clearly see the logic behind this nomenclating structure: the prefix *ali-* refers to some ambiguous or in-between quality such as the semi-consonantal quality of sounds 'y, r, l, v,' which can function either as consonants or vowels, or to the gender-

[271] For discussion about the origin of the word, as well as the description of being shamed by it, see chapter 1. I would also like to point out that the word *ali* can be seen in the autobiographies by Revathi and Vidya, as used by transgender women themselves. Revathi, being older, uses it more often.

[272] "Piṉpu ali eṉṟa col nīṇṭakālamāka vaḻakkil iruntu vantatu. intac col evvāṟu ic camūkattiṟku cūṭṭappaṭṭatu eṉpataṟkāṉavivaraṅkaḷ illai. ic col mikak kēvalamāṉac collākavē aravāṉikaḷ camūkattālum pārkkappaṭṭatu." (Later, the word 'ali' was in use for a very long time. There are no details (information) about how this word was given to aravāṉis. Aravāṉis are regarded as
(Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 15)

[273] *Kriyāviṉ Taṟkālat Tamiḻ Akarāti: Tamiḻ-Tamiḻ-Āṅkilam*. 2nd ed. Chennai: Kriyā, 2008: 34.

[274] University of Madras, ed. *Tamiḻp Pērakarāti: Tamiḻ-Tamiḻ-Āṅkilam = Tamil Lexicon:Tamil-Tamil-English*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. 6 vols. Chennai: Ceṉṉaip Palkalaikkaḻakam, 2012: 147.

muted or potency-muted astrological understanding of the planets (and deities) Saturn (Tam. *Caṉi*) and Mercury (Tam. *Putaṉ*).[275] In the case of *ali-maram*, *ali-* seems to suggest uselessness, (i.e. tree/wood that cannot be used for cutting and shaping during the construction of buildings or items). Indeed, *ali* does not seem to be the right term for a group desiring to change its image in mainstream society.

The proper term for Tamil transgender women, Priya instructs, is *aravāṉi*. She also provides very interesting information about the origin of this term:

> "In 1994, as part of the Koovagam festivities, in the nearby city Viluppuram the first beauty contest for aravāṉis was held. The then Viluppuram district police superintendent R. Ravi was there as the guest of honor and he first called this community aravāṉi. In his words: 'Members of this community once a year marry Aravāṉ as their husband and because of that we should call them aravāṉis.'"[276]

That the superintendent R. Ravi was instrumental in this myth-making moment seems to be confirmed by the *Times of India* in an article dated to the Indian Republic Day this year (January 26). It informs us about the three inspectors general of police from Tamil Nadu who were chosen for President's police medal for distinguished service on that day. One of them, M. Ravi, is said to have introduced "the term 'Aravani', which refers to the transgender community." It is not clear from the article, though, whether Mr. Ravi received

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[275] See discussion on relationship between Hermes/Mercury and Attis, Cybele's transgender priest/companion, in the chapter on the Koovagam festival.

[276] "1994 ām āṇṭu viḻuppuram māvaṭṭattiluḷḷa kūvākam kirāmattil naṭaipperra kūttāṇṭavar ālayat tiruviḻāviṉ pōtu viḻuppuram nakaril aravāṉikaḷukkāṉa aḻakip pēṭṭi naṭaiperratu. inta nikaḻccikku ciṟappu viruntiṉarāka appōtaiya viḻuppuram māvaṭṭa cūpiraṇṭ āp pōlīs Ār. Ravi avarkaḷ aravāṉi eṉṟa peyarai iccamūkattiṟku cūṭṭiṉar. avar kūṟukaiyil: iccamūkattiṉar varuṭam oru muṟai aravāṉai taṅkaḷiṉ kaṇavaṉāka ēṟṟu tālik kaṭṭik koḷvatāl inta aravāṉiṉ manaiviyaagiya ivarkaḷ aravāṉikaḷ eṉṟu aḻaikkalām eṉṟu iccamūkattiṟku putu peyarai vaḻaṅkiṉār" (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 15)

this distinguished award for this reason, or because he had "busted the milk adulteration racket" in the biggest Tamil dairy company (Aavin) and introduced "e-challan system" earlier while working as a commissioner of traffic for Chennai police.[277]

Considering that the *Thamilnadu Aravanigal Association* (THAA), registered under the Society Act in 1998 under the leadership of a tirunangai Aasha Bharathi, was the first organization in Tamil Nadu that carried the term Aravāṉi, I wrongly assumed that the tirunangais involved in its founding were also the ones who started the usage of this previously nonexistent term. I find the fact that a policeman came up with a respectable name for transgender people ironic and would like to ask Revathi, who has experienced police violence and brutality on many occasions as a beggar and sex worker in Bangalore, whether she would find it too. On the other hand, who is a better person symbolizing everyday authority in India than a policeman, and, on top of that, a superintendent?!

While continuing to document this historical moment for the Tamil transgender community, Priya makes a very astute observation: "Even though the reason for this name was religious, aravāṉis wholeheartedly accepted it because it was a respectable (*mariyātaikkuriya*) name."[278] Therefore, similarly to the case of the Hyderabadi *hijras*, the question of *mariyātai*, meaning 'respect, honor in society' is looming large at the core of

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[277] "22 Officers from State Get President's Police Medal - Times of India." *The Times of India*. Accessed May 6, 2016. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/22-officers-from-state-get-Presidents-police-medal/articleshow_new/50725149.cms.

[278] "ippeyar camayam cārnta kāraṇappeyarāka iruntālum mariyātaikkuriya peyarāka iruppatiṉāl aravāṉikaḷ camūkam ippeyarai uḷḷaṉpuṭaṉ ērrukkoṇṭaṉar." (Babu, *Aravāṇikaḷ*, 15)

Tamil transgender women's identity. Priya relates respectability to religion, but what exactly does she mean by that? Aravāṉ's festival and the rituals accompanying it are certainly manifestations of the Hindu religious tradition but it will be clear from the further chapters that from Priya's point of view its Hindu-ness is not – at least not directly – what dons its respectability. Rather, with a goal to demonstrate to mainstream society the richness of aravāṉis' cultural heritage – which, Priya claims has not been properly displayed to the public – it is the fact of *having* and *performing* rituals and customs, just like any other *camūkam* [community] that, in Priya's eyes, provides so needed *mariyātai* [respect] to the ostracized tirunangais.

This is also evident from the very next paragraph in which she reluctantly introduces the then newly emerged word *tirunangai*. "*Tiru*-," she says, "denotes respectability and the male gender," whereas "-*naṅkai* proclaims femininity (*peṇmai*)." "They argue that this word should be used instead of aravāṉi," Priya says without providing reason for it. "They say that this word increases their worth/value [*matippu*] in society." Obviously a supporter of the term 'aravāṉi,' Priya, here, does not use the word *mariyātai* but rather *matippu*. With a sentence mentioning transgender women's terms in northern India (*hijra, mātāji*), Priya closes abruptly the first chapter of the book.

TOṟṟAT TŌṆMAM: THE ORIGIN MYTH

Priya Babu provides the following story as the "aravāṉi origin myth:"

> In Gujarat, in the Mewar district, a king ruled. This king took great pleasure in hunting. One day while he was hunting within the territory of

his kingdom, he saw a dilapidated temple. Near it, he was astonished to see a woman drying her hair after bathing in the tank. The king saw the girl's dark blue hair touch the ground and sensed fragrance wafting from it. He thought: "If the girl's hair is so beautiful how much more beautiful her face must be?" He eagerly approached her. He was shocked. Yes, her face matching a goddess's enchanted the king. He asked, "Who are you, woman?" She answered, "I am a woman living in this forest." The king said, "Woman, I am king of this land, and this too belongs to my kingdom. I really like you. Tonight I will return. Be ready!" and he rode off on his horse. The woman was astonished. She was Kalidevi, guarding this area (lit. the border, *ellai*). She was shocked and deeply immersed in her thoughts. She didn't even notice when her younger brother returned from the hunt, so immersed in thoughts was the Kali of the Border. Her brother came closer to her. "Why are you so immersed in thoughts?" he asked. She told him in detail what had occurred. Her brother got enraged, "I will kill that king who fancies Kalidevi, the guardian of this land's border, and put his head at your feet!" He thought to take off but Kalidevi prevented him, "We are gods, but this territory is within the king of Mewar's land. We who live here cannot override the king's authority. However, we must think of some other way," she said.

Her brother listened to her words and started to think, "I will take care of this. Don't worry!" he said. The night came. The brother shaved off his mustache, dressed himself in a sari, and put on jewelry like a real woman, and waited for the king. When the king came, he made love to Kalidevi's brother thinking him to be his sister, in a nearby cottage. At dawn, the rooster crowed. The king hurriedly changed clothes and left. Kalidevi's brother came out of the cottage, his clothes in disarray and the makeup smeared on his face. There stood Kalidevi in her frightful form (*ākrōṣamāṉa uruvil*). With her sharp sword she cut off her brother's penis. He stood there confused, "What did you do sister?" How will I live from now on? Why did you cut off my penis?" He asked. "When you are able to satisfy a man, then why do you need the marking of one?" – Kali said. "But what about the future? How will I have children (*santati* – offspring)," he asked longingly. "Brother, some people are naturally born like you, having different feelings and wanting to have sex with men. They are born as men but cut off their penis when they are older and they become women. Thinking of you as a deity, they will cut of their penises in your name. They will be your progeny." she said.[279]

Considering Priya Babu's enthusiasm for the Aravāṉ cult, with its ritual dimensions providing legitimacy and even respect to the downtrodden transgender women, I expected

[279] Babu, *Aravāṉikaḷ*, 17-18.

this chapter to focus on the Aravāṉ mythology. Instead, Priya provides an origin myth that, she claims, spread throughout all of India (*intiya muḻuvathum nilavukiṟatu*[280]). This, I believe, is completely in keeping with Priya's mission to depict the transgender community of India as one, not particularly differentiated, community imagined as an iṉam [race]. We have witnessed already that she refers to all transgender people of India as "aravāṉi," regardless of their geographic origins, temporal context, and cultural differences. Likewise, these pan-Indian aravāṉis also have one *katai* [story] that explains how Priya's iṉam came into being.

What fascinates me about this narrative is that it is supposed to tell the story of Potraj Mata, another name of the Gujarati goddess Bahuchara Mātā, popular among many Indian transgender women, which has its cultic origin in modern-day Gujarat. Instead, the myth Priya tells us seems both so "Aravāṉized" and 'Tamilized," to the point that without its geographic specifications (Gujarat, Mewar) we could easily read it as a rather uncommon retelling of the Aravāṉ myth. Potraj Mata is not even mentioned as the name of the goddess! In fact, a verbatim segment of this story prefaces Priya's book:

> The night came. Kalidevi's brother shaved off his mustache, dressed himself in a sari, and put on jewelry like a real woman, and waited for the king. When the king came, he made love to Kalidevi's brother thinking him to be his sister, in a nearby cottage. At dawn, the rooster crowed. The king hurriedly changed clothes and left. Kalidevi's brother came out of the

[280] Ibid., 19.

> cottage, his clothes in disarray and the makeup smeared on his face. There stood Kalidevi in her frightful form. With her sharp sword she cut off her brother's penis. He stood there confused, "What did you do sister?" How will I live from now on? Why did you cut off my penis?" He asked. "When you are able to satisfy a man, then why do you need the marking of one?" – Kali replied.[281]

When I first read this short paragraph, I identified Kalidevi and her younger brother, without help of location qualifiers such as Gujarat or Mewar, as the ferocious goddess who demands a hero's head for her sacrifice and Krishna as her younger brother, as well as the crossdressing seductress Mohinī. 'King,' [*aracaṉ*], just seemed as another way to refer to Aravāṉ. Moreover, if we compare this "version" of the story to the other available Bahuchara myths, its rootedness in Tamil devotionalism is instantly discernable.

A British scholar Jennifer Ung Loh collected several versions of the Bahuchara myth in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh and she notes that transgender women in these localities "employ multiple myths about Bahuchara, but tend to identify certain narratives as being key to understanding *hijra* identity, including explaining Bahuchara's gender transformations, ability to curse, and special connection to the *hijras*."[282]

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[281] Ibid. page 0.

[282] Ung Loh, Jennifer. "Narrating Identity: The Employment of Mythological and Literary Narratives in Identity Formation Among the Hijras of India." *Religion and Gender* 4, no. 1 (June 23, 2014): 34.

Ung records three most commonly told versions of the Bahuchara myth: 1) Bahuchara is a young woman traveling through a forest and she is attacked by highway robbers. To warrant she is not raped she cuts of her breasts, which grants her a deified status; 2) She is raped but she curses the robbers by turning them into *hijras*; 3) Bahuchara is a prince who transforms himself into a beautiful woman when attacked by these forest thieves. They try to rape her and she cuts off her breasts to become neither female nor male. Since this does not prevent them in their villainy Bahuchara prays to god Vishnu to provide a shelter for her. The earth opens up and she jumps in it and her life is saved. She curses the robbers to become *hijras*.

Yes, the Kalidevi in Priya's retelling of the story is similarly vulnerable to male sexual assault as in Ung's version, but, unlike in Ung where the young woman needs to experience an assault by highway robbers to initiate the gender metamorphosis, in Priya's version she is already a goddess. Rather, it is her brother who ends up castrated, and as such becomes the progenitor of the entire *aravāṉi iṉa*m [transgender community].

Priya Babu's Kalidevi is the bloodthirsty goddess of the village borders [*avaḷ anta ellaiyaik kākkum Kāḷitēvi*].[283] David Shulman who studied numerous Tamil *tālapurāṇams* (corpus of texts providing the origins and traditions of particular Tamil Shaiva temples or shrines), remarks that "the deity of the Tamil shrine is nearly always revealed – we might say born – in violence."[284] This is based, he believes, on the primordial cult of the goddess

283 Babu, *Aravāṉikaḷ*, 18.

284 Shulman, David Dean. *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1980: 108.

who, in specific locales, regenerates her devotee in his worldly life by absorbing the power and life [*uyir*] contained in his blood and then giving him a new birth. This death and rebirth is ritually effected through a surrogate victim whose blood transfers the *uyir* to her which she then restores in an enhanced form. But when he does this, Shulman argues, the devotee imitates a divine exemplar: "the deity offers up his own life in order to be reborn from the sacrifice."[285]

Aravāṉ, is a clear example of this divine victim, and his cult is a perfect illustration of this Tamil type of devotional fervor described by Shulman, even though the classical Goddess-Shiva tension – which according to Shulman, defines mythological narratives in the sacred locales of South India – is camouflaged by having been integrated into a Mahabharata ritual context. For example, goddess Kāli is not a main character in the Aravāṉ myth told and enacted in Koovagam every year, but everyone knows that it is her to whom Aravāṉ is sacrificed at her small temple at the village *border*. Additionally, castration is often a symbolic substitute for the sacrifice, similarly to Shulman's understanding of the death of Shiva in the myths he investigates, in which Shiva is only implicit but can be read, he argues, metonymically (e.g., the killing of Shiva is represented by his being wounded, by his being castrated, or by his being temporarily blinded by his consort).[286] The Tamilized myth of the pan-Indian *hijra* goddess Bahuchara Mata thus makes perfect sense in Priya's ethnography: it correlates Tamil tirunangais to a wider

[285] Ibid., 92.
[286] Ibid., 98-112.

cultural and religious milieu from which Priya believes they were excluded because they were criminalized and later ostracized by mainstream society. Another example of this correlating is evident in the previously mentioned documentary film Priya made around the same time as the ethnography. At the very beginning of it, we can see Priya (PB) interviewing a senior tirunangai (ST) who seems to be the main ritual specialist for the series of rituals about to be performed for a young tirunangai about to start her *nirvāṇam* [castration surgery]. Priya, it seems, is guiding the elder tirunangai to specifically say that Bahucara Mātā is in fact the one and the same deity as Ammaṉ, a generic Tamil word denoting goddesses, and especially Shaiva ones as Kalidevi is.

> PB: What is the name of this deity [*anta tevattoṭa pēr enna mā*]?
>
> ST: Bēcāra Māttā [Bahucāra Mātā]
>
> PB: Is she a form of some god or an avatar of the Goddess [*itu etāvatu cāmiyōṭa vaṭivamā illēṉṉā oru ammaṉuṭaiya avatāramā*]?
>
> ST: This deity is an avatar of the Goddess [*inta ammaṉ oru ammā avatāram tāṉ*].[287]

Moreover, this story is finally a *toṟṟat tōṉmam*, an origin myth, whose purpose, I believe, is explaining to the people of India – where *mariyātai* [societal respect] is, as Priya is clearly so aware of, often inextricably tied to some form of religious legitimization) – how the first aravāṉi came into being, and also how further progeny [*cantati*] continues to occur. While discussing Priya's introductory chapter, I underlined the fact that, in Priya's

[287] Babu, Priya. *Folklore of the Transgender Community in Tamil Nadu*. National Folklore Support Centre, 2007: (02:42 – 02:56).

opinion, the lack of traditional procreation [*marapurītiyāṉa iṉapperukkam*] of her community presents the very root of all their problems.

With this mythological narrative, thus, Priya fulfills the requirement that an ethnography of a community necessarily include its origin myth, and more importantly, provide a religious justification for the castration practice that scandalized the nineteenth-century British administrators and public, and remained *the* lens of understanding, or rather misunderstanding transgender people in post-Independence India.

Moreover, Priya does not fail to mention that the need for changing one's gender is based on the innate differentness of some people who are born having one gender, and yet *feel* as another. By doing so, she yet again tries to destabilize the notion that people's gender is determined solely by their sexual organs, or lack thereof, and underscores the psychological factors of *feeling* different as the main defining factor.

MŌḶI: LANGUAGE

> "Aravāṉis spread throughout the country. They have one common language for themselves. This language is spoken throughout India starting from Karnataka in the south all the way to northern India. If two aravāṉis don't have Hindi or other Indian language in common, with the aid of this language, they can communicate regardless of which state they are from.

Although this language is not much in circulation in Tamil Nadu, most senior aravāṉis still speak it."[288]

Thus begins the chapter on language in Priya Babu's ethnography. Language is one of the most potent markers of identity and Priya makes sure that her community is discussed having one too. In the previous chapter we saw how Priya, selects a more widespread, rather than a local Tamil, religious narrative to explain the origin of her community, and, further, infuses it with the specificities of the Tamil religious landscape, such as the castration of the male character close to the goddess (symbolizing sacrifice to the Goddess). We also saw how she equates the Gujarati goddess Bahuchara Mātā, popular among the *hijras* of Delhi, Mumbai, and other Indian metropolitan cities, with the goddess Kalidevi.

We will see a similar method of pan-Indianization in Priya's chapter on the language of tirunangais. Priya asserts that there is a language common to all transgender women of India, which is spoken from Karnataka in the south all the way up to northern India. This language serves as a lingua franca to Indian transgender women with no language in common, except that it is not really spoken or understood much in Tamil Nadu. Priya further provides the name of this language: Kavuṭi [*kavuṭi pāṣai*], and adds that it has

288 "aravāṉikaḷ nāṭu muḻutum paraviyirukkiṉṟaṉar. ivarkāḷ taṅkaḷukku potumoḻi oṉṟai puḻakkattil puḻaṅki varukiṉṟaṉar. inta moḻi intiya muḻumaikkumāṉa moḻiyākak kāṇappaṭṭālum karnāṭaka mutal vāṭā intiya muḻuvatum uḻḻa aravāṉikaḷāl inta moḻi pēcappaṭṭu varukiṟatu. aravāṉi oruvarukku intiyō allatu piṟa pāṣaiyō teriyāviṭṭālum inta moḻiyiṉ tuṇaiyuṭaṉ intiya muḻuvatum uḻḻa enta oru mānila aravāṉik kuḻumpattuṭaṉ mika eḷitāka toṭarpu koḻḻalām. tamiḻakattil periya aḷavil inta moḻi puḻakkattil illāviṭṭālum perumpālāṉa mūtta aravāṉikaḷāl iṉṟum pēcappaṭṭu varukiṟatu" (Babu, *Aravāṉikaḷ*, 21).

neither a grammar [*ilakkaṇam*], nor morphology [*uruva amaippu*], and that it is a mixture of Hindi and Sanskrit words.[289]

I could not find any other reference to the name of this language. However, from the onset of my foray into researching Tamil transgender women, I have been aware of a particular vocabulary used by many tirunangais in order to communicate without being understood by outsiders. Most of these words seemed to have arrived from Hindi/Urdu, which did not surprise me since many Tamil transgender women, prior to the success of the Koovagam festival and all its subsequent positive changes, chose to leave Tamil Nadu to seek better living in metropolitan Indian cities.

Gayatri Reddy also mentions in her ethnography of the Hyderabadi *hijras* a particular vocabulary used by her informants, which she, as well as her friends and family members, could not understand, despite her knowledge of Telugu and Hindi/Urdu, most commonly spoken languages in that area of Andhra Pradesh.[290] Serena Nanda does not provide information about any such language, or jargon. In fact, even Priya does not teach us much about this language that she is making a case for. All in all, she lists twenty-seven words, twenty of which are kinship terms, providing first the "tirunangai language" version, followed by its translation in standard Tamil. Of the seven non-kinship words she lists, five of them refer to people.

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[289] "inti, camaskirutam kalanta vārttaikaḷaiyē ivarkaḷ pēcuvatāl…" Ibid.

[290] Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005: 45.

Thus we learn that: *kōṭi* = police [*pōlīs*], *panti* = man [*āṇ*], *nāraṉ* = woman [*peṇ*], *kōtti* = aravāṉi, *ṭeppar* = money [*paṇam*], *kāṉā* = food [*cāppāṭu*], and *rēski* = hair [*talaimuṭi*]. Kōtti and panti (*koti* and *panti*[291]) are the very terms that puzzled Reddy. All other words listed are concerned with kinship terms used in tirunangai households. For example, kuru [guru] = mother [ammā], makaḷ [daughter] = cēlā, and so on.[292]

Perhaps prompted by the discussion of kinship terms, Priya abruptly abandons the topic of the tirunangai language having provided the list of relevant words, and starts describing the relationship between a tirunangai and her adoptive mother in very idealized terms. Priya claims that the adoptive tirunangai mother and her *cēlā* never fight, even though daughters frequently fight amongst one other.[293] Whichever fights and problems might come up, they only last for a short time, Priya assures us because there is "a deep and true affection" [*āḻamāṉa uṇmaiyāṉa pācam*] between them.[294]

It is with the next sentence, that we can start discerning in Priya's text suggestions that tirunangais should be taken in many respects as ideal fellow -citizens, an idea that will be reiterated several times more in the text, as we shall see later: "Members of other communities show affection only if they can expect money, things and property. On the

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[291] Ibid.

[292] Babu, *Aravāṉikaḷ*, 22-3.

[293] "aravāṉi camūkattil tāy aravāṉikkum, makaḷ aravāṉikkum caṇṭai vara vāyppillai. aṉāl oru tāyiṉ makaḷ, makaḷkaḷukkiṭaiyē caṇṭaikaḷ vara vāyppukaḷ atikam" (ibid., 23).

[294] Ibid.

other hand, these [tirunangais] with nothing to look forward to have affection and love."[295] Moreover, Priya finishes the chapter by describing how younger tirunangais treat the older ones with respect, and insists that "making fun of one's religion, caste or ethnicity (inam), talking about them or even merely enquiring about them is not allowed and this fact is strictly followed."[296]

With this statement, I argue, we can see start seeing a method in Priya's writing which will become more fully articulated in the following chapter focusing primarily on the details of performing specific rituals. I maintain that Priya effectively and in a truly ingenious way dismantles the paradigm of understanding transgender women by mainstream society as physically challenged sexual deviants, by constantly underlining the inner, psychological, excellence of transgender women, especially when coupled by the legitimizing structure of various rituals that, she claims, completely govern their lives.

RĪT MUTAL RAṆṬAPPĀ VARAI

In this chapter, Priya most clearly, and certainly in many more words than in any other chapter, defines what having and performing rituals [*caṭaṅkukaḷ*] means for the wellbeing, if not, existence of the community of transgender women of Tamil Nadu and India. In the very first sentence she thus boldly pronounces: "Rituals are not only proclamations of the cultural components of a community but they also reveal a

[295] "piṟa camūkattiṉar paṇam, poruḷ, cottu, ivaikaḷai etirpārttu pācam kāṭṭuvar. māṟāka ivarkaḷiṭam evvita etirpārppum illāmal pācamum aṉpum irukkum" (Ibid.).
[296] "iṅku piṟariṉ cāti, matam, iṉam kuṟittu kēliyākavō allatu ivai kuṟittup pēcuvatō nī eṉṉa cāti eṉṟu kēṭpatu kūṭa kūṭātu eṉpatai kaṭumaiyāka kaṭaip piṭikkiṉṟaṉar." (Ibid.).

community's customs and ways of living."[297] We saw earlier that Priya defines *mariyātai* [societal respect] granted to tirunangais, in relation to religion [*camayam*]. I suggested then that to Priya Babu traditional religious affiliation (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, etc.) and beliefs are not solely what defines religion. Rather, I argued, it is the fact of *having* rituals and everything else accompanying it – contrasted with the general views of mainstream society that they do *not* have culture and religion – that provides respectability to any community in India, including hers. Priya's next sentence perfectly illustrates this: "Generally, rituals are proofs of a community's antiquity, devotion and especially origin stories about their god."[298]

In continuation, Priya defines again who aravāṉis are (individuals who come from other social groups because they feel different and want to become women) and reminds us again of the existential necessity forcing many transgender women to leave their homes and seek asylum among people who feel the same way. It should be stressed, she also does not fail to mention that not anyone can join her community: "aravāṉis adopt only those who come to them with a sure goal, those who are steadfast in their decision to become aravāṉis."[299] I believe that this statement must be understood as a reaction against the wrong belief, often found in mainstream society, that transgender women steal babies and

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297 "caṭaṅkukaḷ eṉpavaikaḷ oru camūkattiṉ paṇpāṭṭukkūṟukaḷai paṟaicārṟupavaikalākavē uḻḷatu maṭṭumallātu accamūkam cārnta vaḻakkāṟukaḷaiyum, paḻakkavaḻakkaṅkaḷaiyum veḷippaṭuttupavaiyākavē amaikiṉṟaṉa" (Ibid., 41).

298 "potuvāka caṭaṅkukaḷ kuṟippiṭṭa camūkattiṉ paḻamai, pakti, kuṟippāka kaṭavuḷ kuṟitta ātārakkataikaḷai nirūpippavaikaḷākavē amaikiṉṟatu" (Ibid.).

299 "maṉa uṟutiyuṭaṉ aravāṉiyākavēṇṭum eṉṟa tiṇṇamāṉa muṭivuṭaṉ varupavarkaḷai maṭṭumē aravāṉikaḷ tattu eṭuppār" (Ibid.).

small boys, and forcefully transform them into sexual deviants by castrating them. I showed earlier that this type of stereotyping directed at tirunangais' supposedly criminal and sexually deviant behavior has its origin in the oppressive ethnographic projects started by the British colonial administration.

Priya then focuses on the aravāṉi adoption ritual which she finds absolutely essential for tirunangais as individuals and as a community, or as she formulates it, "the adoption ritual is the foundation for new relationships in an aravāṉi's life."[300] This ritual, according to Priya also illustrates religious tolerance of transgender women because "the aravāṉi daughter in this ritual does not consider either religion, ethnicity, or language of her aravāṉi mother. Likewise, the aravāṉi mother worries not about her daughter's either. That is why the aravāṉi community is seen as a community that does not discriminate against religion, ethnicity, and language."[301]

With the following sentence Priya takes this line of reasoning even further developing another fascinating argument about why her community should be accepted by mainstream society: "[the fact that her community is tolerant on various counts] can be seen as an element of bringing out dignity [*māṇpu*] of Indian political sovereignty."[302] What Priya is trying to say here, I am quite certain, is that the aravāṉi community should in fact be *the* model community for the secular Indian society that constitutionally does not

[300] "inta tattu caṭaṅkutāṉ aravāṉi vāḻviṉ putiya uṟavukkāṉa aṭittaḷam" (Ibid. 41-2).

[301] Ibid. 42.

[302] "itu namatu intiya araciyal amaippiṉ iṟaiyāṇmai māṇpai veḷikkoṇarum aṅkamākap pārkkalām" (Ibid.).

recognize religion or caste. Priya further provides numerous details regarding the exact proceedings of the adoption rituals: who has to be present, what is said, what is eaten and drunk, and so on.

The rest of the chapter is concerned with the rituals performed prior to and after the castration surgery. Before she tirelessly lists all their intricate details, Priya again argues that her community, when closely inspected, is, in fact better than mainstream society because "the piety [*teyva nampikkai*] of the aravāṉi community is greater than the piety of mainstream society."[303]

Both the description in the book and the documentary film present a very idealized picture of the castration surgery. The novice aravāṉi is described to be surrounded by her friends and family, being offered physical and psychological help, and showered with love and admiration. It suffices to compare this rosy portrayal to Revathi's and Living Smile Vidya's hair-raising descriptions of their degrading, isolating and tremendously painful experiences of their *nirvāṇam*, as found in their autobiographies, to realize that Priya's depiction is not what most transgender women actually experience when undergoing this, after all, a very serious, and potentially dangerous, surgical operation. She also implies that the aravāṉis who undergo nirvāṇam, gain great mental and psychological strength.[304]

[303] "potuveḷi camūkattil kāṇappaṭum teyva nampikkaiyaiviṭa atika aḷavu teyva nampikkai aravāṉikaḷ camūkattil kāṇappaṭukiṟatu" (Ibid., 40).

[304] "aṟuvai cikiccai ceyta aravāṉikku maṉōrītiyākavum uḷaviyal rītiyākavum mika periya palamāka amaikiṉṟatu" (Ibid. 45).

I should also mention that Priya seizes every chance she can to draw parallels between the rituals performed by her community and those performed by mainstream society, the purpose of which, evidently, is an attempt to demonstrate the normalcy of her community by suggesting that her community's ritual practices are not, in fact, much different from mainstream society's.

Hence, for instance, Priya devotes a lot of space to the milk pouring ritual [*pālūṟṟutal*] performed at the end of the forty-day recuperation period following the actual surgery. "This ritual," she claims, "is similar to the one performed on the second day after the death of a person in mainstream society. If a person dies, his or her family buries his or her body and the following day they go the place of burial and ritually pour milk, and perform some other rites." Further she compares some other details of the ritual to the elements found in Hindu and Muslim wedding rituals and suggests that we should understand these ritual practices as a mixture of Hindu and Muslim practices.[305]

Priya reiterates many of the claims discussed here throughout the book, but this chapter of her ethnography most consistently and clearly demonstrates the ambition of Priya's ethnographic endeavor whose primary goal is eliminating societal stereotypes focusing on castration and supposed deviant sexual behavior by showing to mainstream society that her community has all the requisite cultural elements as any other Indian religious or ethnic community, and that therefore tirunangais can and must join the ranks of mainstream society as rightful citizens. And not only that, by portraying tirunangai

[305] "inta caṭaṅku naṭaimuṟaikaḷ intu islāmiya kalappiṉ naṭaimuṟaiyākavē uḷḷatu eṉak koḷḷalām" (Ibid, 46).

community as one built on solidarity and love (not caste, ethnicity or religion), Priya also suggests that transgender people should represent ideal citizens of India.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

"You wake up, *flawless*
Post up, *flawless*
Ride round in it, *flawless*
Flossin' on that, *flawless*
This diamond, *flawless*
My diamond, *flawless*
… I woke up like this…"
-- Beyoncé, *Flawless*[306]

"The world is like the impression left by the telling of a story."
-- *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, 2.3.11[307]

Lord
of faces,
find us the face
we lost early
this morning.
-- A. K. Ramanujan, from *Prayers to Lord Murugan*[308]

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[306] Beyoncé speaking of her *self* and her body in her 2013 song *Flawless* of a pronounced feminist and self-affirming character. Emphasis in bold is mine. I explain in the course of the text the significance of these lyrics for my dissertation.

[307] Here I use a quote found in Calasso, Roberto. *Ka: Stories of the Mind and Gods of India*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013. Calasso's earlier book, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1994), greatly impressed me with the author's ability to seamlessly weave one myth into another in his unique retelling of the ancient Greek myths, and thus placing an emphasis on the metamorphosis itself (and the trigger for it: desire). Of course, this quote also underlines the proactive character of the tirunangai texts in their potential to create real change in how they are perceived in society.

This quote also relates me to my Croatian undergraduate advisor, Dr. Zdravka Matišić, with whom I read in a Sanskrit seminar parts of the *Tantrākhyāyikā*, the oldest Sanskrit recension of the famed *Panchatantra*, and discussed this texts phenomenal success in its innumerable transmutations and translation. Dr. Matišić's own stories about India, and life in general, have been a great source of inspiration and joy in my life for over twenty years.

[308] From Ramanujan, A. K. "Classics Lost and Found." In *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, edited by Vinay Dharwadker, 184–96. New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Ramanujan, as a scholar/poet/philosopher/artist, effectively uses the ancient Tamil *āṟṟuppaṭai* genre (in which one bard directs another how to reach a particular place reigned by a charitable king or divinity) to express quite modern sensitivities. Ramanujan's creative and mindful scholarship is an inspiration for my experimental conclusion at the end of Conclusion. A fellow-Piscean, A. K. Ramanujan guided me toward Austin and the University of Texas and I would like to have him with me at the end of this road.

Steering this thesis to closure, I tie together some of its main themes and topics in the following fashion: 1) by revisiting the tirunangai Living Smile Vidya's poem used epigraphically after the beginning of this dissertation I draw further parallels between the poetic voices of Tamil Hindu devotional literature (bhakti) and the voices of the tirunangai representatives; here, I also add further dimensions to our understanding of "divinity" and "glamor fits," terms I use theoretically following Sedgwick's stipulations about the relationship between queer performativity and shame;[309] 2) by discussing Beyoncé's feminist anthem *Flawless* (2013), I further describe the same concept ("divinity"); 3) by analyzing Priya Babu's novel *Mūn̲rām pāli̲n̲ mukam* ('the face of the third gender"), I effectively review Chapter 3, that is, Priya Babu's ethnography of her community, as well as probe inquiries into the potential of 3rd-person narratives as representational narratives; and 4) I provide final thoughts on the "ethnography of empathy" proposed in the introductory essay.

With this ouroboric move, I also gesture toward Indian narrative traditions that frame stories within stories, and toward the path of self-introspection and self-reflexivity that the ouroboros iconographically represents.[310] The ouroboros is a potent image for me

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[309] Moon, Michael, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "Divinity: A Dossier A Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion." *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 12–39.

[310] While sorting out thoughts for the Conclusion, I have realized that the ouroboros is the perfect iconographic representative of many processes, persons and things (including this text itself) that I discuss in this dissertation. *Ouroboros* in Greek literally means "tail-eating," as an attribute to drakōn, "snake, dragon," and hence *drakōn ouroboros* is a "snake eating its own tail." As a potent symbol of rebirth, regeneration and immortality, the ouroboros can be found in many cultures around the world. In India, one of the most famous ouroboric myths is the one of god Vishnu reclined on the snake Śeṣa (Shesha) in the middle of the cosmic ocean; from Vishnu's navel a lotus grows on which the god Brahmā creates all the forms in the universe as a secondary creator. Traces of the ophidian ouroboros can also be seen in Aravā̲n̲, a son of the *Mahabharata* hero Arjuna and a snake-like being (*nāga*) Ulupī. Considering that Arjuna is a son of Indra, king of the celestials, Aravan himself represents this the marriage of opposites: celestial and chthonic. In his annual festival, Aravan as a devoted sacrificial victim is also a symbol of rebirth (Alf Hiltebeitel, "Dying Before the Mahabharata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-Building for Aravan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 469.

because it, like the phoenix, is "a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite."[311] As a symbol of rebirth and victory over life's constraints, it is also in congruence with the texts under scrutiny here, all of which contrast the liberating feeling of finding and negotiating one's own story to the oppressiveness of being silent and spoken for. Furthermore, in the words of Carl Gustav Jung, "[b]eing hermaphroditic, [the ouroboros] is compounded of opposites and is at the same time their uniting symbol: at once deadly poison, basilisk, scorpion, panacea, and saviour."[312]

Smiley's poem was published in an online literary magazine *Peṇṇiyam* (Feminism) in 2010 and is but one example of Smiley's poetic output and her creative genius.[313] The phrasing from the end of this poem, *kampīramāy niṟkirāḷ* ([she] is standing majestically), provides the title for this thesis: *Majestic Presence*.[314] As I explain in the introductory essay, by choosing Priya's fabulous syntagm, I underline the triumphant aspect of tirunangai narratives as a not-clearly understood "interface between abjection and defiance,"[315] while at the same time paying homage to Sedgwick and her insightful and loving interpretation of John Waters' drag star Divine and her "glamor fits."

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311 C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. edition (New York: Princeton University Press, 1980): 513.

312 Ibid., 372.

313 Smiley is also a stunning visual artist. Her drawings have been exhibited at the galleries in Delhi, Bangalore and Chennai, as well as online magazines. When I met Smiley in the fall of 2013, she had no drawing left to show me in person since she had sold them all (as well as the rights to her autobiography *Nān Vityā*) in order to make ends meet in the everyday fight for survival. Some of Smiley's surrealist drawings can be seen at this webpage: http://www.vallinam.com.my/issue44/announcement1.html

314 The old working title had been *Aravāṉis: The Face of the Third Gender*, inspired by the title of Priya Babu's novel *Mūṉrām pāliṉ mukam* ('the face of the third gender').

315 Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier A Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion," *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 27.

I also conjured up the title by noticing a similarity with a much older poem, one by the celebrated Tamil bhakti poet Nammāḻvar dated to the late ninth and early tenth centuries.[316] Let us take a look at it in A. K. Ramanujan's translation:

> We here and that man, this man,
> and that other in-between,
> and that woman, this woman,
> and that other, whoever,
>
> those people, and these,
> and these others in-between,
> this thing, that thing,
> and this other in-between, whichever,
>
> all things dying, these things,
> those things, those others in-between,
> good things, bad things,
> things that were, that will be,
>
> being all of them,
> he stands there.[317]

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[316] Nammāḻvār and A. K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981): xi.

[317] *nām avaṉ ivaṉ uvaṉ/ avaḷ ivaḷ uvaḷ evaḷ / tāṉ avar ivar uvar / atu itu utu etu / vīm avai ivai uvai / avai nalam tīṅku avai/ ām avai āy avai / āy niṉṟa avarē* (Nammāḻvār and A. K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981: 121).

As, Ramanujan notes, the poem seems like a grammatical exercise in Tamil pronouns (impossible to preserve in the English translation), enclosed between ""We here" *(nām)* and "he there," the Lord *(avarē);* contained between these two are all things, all persons, all beings."[318] Nammalvar's god is at the same time all beings, ever in the process of being/becoming, as indicated in Tamil by the verbal forms *āy* ('having become') and *ām* (''will become'), yet remains one. In Smiley's poem, I detect some similarities. Let us look at it anew:

> We have wiped off family ties like the tears of loneliness;
> Trickling like the blood of castration, identities slowly vanished;
> Outside problems expelled, like shit held back for far too long;
> Whatever is lost, whatever gained
> She stands there majestically – a woman, me.[319]

Smiley's poem shifts through persons from the "we" inherent in the verb form *tuṭaittu viṭṭōm* ([we] wiped off), via the third-person plural (*maṟaintu pōṉatu* ['they vanished'[320]] and *veḷiyēṟiṉa* [[they were] expelled]) for irrational objects such as 'identities' and 'outside problems,' to the third person feminine of the Tamil verb *nil* ['to stand'], *niṟkiṟāḷ*, agreeing with *peṇ* ['woman']. Instead of *avarē* '[him'] in Nammalvar's verse, this poem ends with *nān* ['I'] who is, in fact, "she." In both poems we can find forms of the verb *nil*, the participial *niṉṟa* in Nammalvar, and the finite present form *niṟkiṟāḷ* in

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318 Ibid., 123.

319 Taṉimaiyiṉ kaṇṇīr tuḷi pōla / uṟavukaḷai tuṭaittu viṭṭōm //
nirvāṇa poḻutiṉ rattam pōla / aṭaiyāḷaṅkaḷ mella maṟaintu pōṉatu //
nīṇṭa nēram aṭakkiya malam pōla / veḷiyēṟiṉa cila puṟaccikkalkaḷ //
ētētō iḻantum, perrum / kampīramāy niṟkiṟāḷ / nāṉ / eṉum peṇ //

320 Here, I read *maṟaintu pōṉatu* as *maṟaintu pōyiṉa*.

Smiley, which is also reflected in my 'there' mimicking Ramanujan's apt intervention in selecting the idiomatic 'there' in his English translation of Nammalvar's poem. After shifting through all these identities, Smiley's 'I' (i.e. *peṇ*, woman) is triumphantly portrayed as self-sufficient (whether she loses or gains anything), all-pervasive, and majestic, much in the same vein as Nammalvar's shape-shifting god.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I use the Tamil bhakti concept of *pukaḻperṟa iṭam* ['place that has received praise'] to discuss Koovagam as the most central place in creating mythological material for the festival of Aravan, as well as for Tamil transgender women. There, I also underscore the highly emotional atmosphere created by tirunangais' re-enactment of Aravan's marriage and death, also found in many Tamil bhakti poems, as well as the fact that people have used the emotionalism and directness of bhakti to question and subvert caste, gender and institutional norms throughout the Indian history. I did not stress enough, though, the salience of Tamil bhakti poems as poems of lived experience and personhood.

Unlike most of other literature composed in India before the end of the first millennium CE, Tamil bhakti poems usher in distinct poetic voices that proudly give form to seemingly historical persons. For example, in the final stanza (*phalaśruti*[321]) the poet announces himself in person and directly addresses the audience. Norman Cutler observes that the bhakti "poet sets himself [or herself] up as a model for other devotees," and that "[i]n effect he [or she] invites other devotees to relive his [or her] own experience." For example, Aṇṭāḷ (Andal), a female poet almost contemporaneous to Nammalvar, merges the

[321] See Norman Cutler, "The Devotee's Experience of the Sacred Tamil Hymns," *History of Religions* 24, no. 2 (1984): 95; Nammāḻvār and A. K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981): 163.

poet referred to as Kōtai (Kodai) with various imagined personae from the Krishnaite world imagined by Andal (or perhaps even lived in a profound mystical experience).[322]

Cutler distinguishes two types of audiences for Andal's poems: the first is the god in his transcendent and earthly manifestations, while the second is comprised of devotees like Andal, to whom these words are an encouragement for their own exploration of the divine.[323] It could be said that there are two sets of audiences for Smiley's art, tirunangai and non-tirunangai. For the non-tirunangais, this poem – if I interpret it according to my argument that tirunangai self-narratives should be read as "representational contracts" negotiated between the bodies of tirunangais and Tamiḻakam – is a sign that they are in the presence of someone who has, because of her suffering, become divine like a goddess. For instance, a parallel could be drawn here between Smiley and Kaṇṇaki (Kannagi), the deified heroine of the classical Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* (discussed briefly in Chapter 1).

For the tirunangai audience, on the other hand, this poem is conceivably not an invitation to relive Smiley's experiences, but rather a confirmation that they should not flinch at adversity and, instead, embrace the painful transitions in the process of becoming something truly divine. I see similarity in RuPaul's motherly yet feisty piece of advice given to the contestants on her show: "Rise up and be fearless like a Maasai warrior. Stake

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[322] In the final stanza of her poem in which she addresses Kāma, deity of erotic love, to unite her with Krishna, the object of her feverish affection, Andal says:

Kōtai of Viṣṇucittaṉ / king of Putuvai /city of towering mansions that rise like mountains / sang this garland of sweet Tamiḻ / to plead with Kāmadeva \ with his sugarcane bow and five-flower arrows / to unite her with the lord who broke the tusk of the elephant / as it screamed in agony/ who ripped apart the beak of the bird / that one dark and lustrous as a gem // Those who sing this soft song of plea / will remain forever at the feet / of the supreme king of the gods (Andal, *The Secret Garland: Antal's Tiruppavai and Nacciyar Tirumoli*, trans. Archana Venkatesan, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010):150).

[323] Norman Cutler, "The Devotee's Experience of the Sacred Tamil Hymns," *History of Religions* 24, no. 2 (1984): 95.

your claim in this lifetime. Remember who you really are. Unleash the dragon and let these bitches have it!"[324]

Furthermore, in Chapter 1, I give special attention to understanding how epic stories have been appropriated by various social groups in Tamil and other South Asian territories. I claim that it is essential to understand the great Indian epics as living, fluid, and transformative/transformable organisms, ever mirroring and questioning the most central concerns, problems and dilemmas of Indian people. The stories of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have been appropriated and altered numerous times in history by endless groups and communities in order to serve their various needs and purposes, which I demonstrated with the examples of Nina Paley's filmmaking, various versions of the Aravan cult, the cult of Draupadi, Telugu women's *Ramayana* songs, and so on.

One important thing should be stressed here: by comparing several stories from the immense South Asian and Indian pool of mythological narratives I wanted to show that even if two texts rely on the same source, and can be similar in many other respects, they still differ in focusing on specific details. For example, for the Vanniyars, members of the South Indian caste, Aravan – known from the Tamilized version of a *Mahabharata* episode – represented the embodiment of the sacrificial ideal expected of medieval warriors whose ranks the Vanniyars hoped to join during the Vijayanagar period (roughly 15th-17th centuries).[325] For the twentieth-century male villagers who participated in the Koovagam festival, Aravan was "their loving and devoted sacrificial victim" whose yearly heroic death ensures proper workings of the natural laws. For tirunangais, Aravan is a husband

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[324] RuPaul is an American drag queen, TV celebrity, published author and performer. For more of her quotes see "25 RuPaul Quotes to Live By." *Drag Official*. Accessed June 16, 2016. http://www.dragofficial.com/13/post/2014/06/25-rupaul-quotes-to-live-by.html.

[325] Alf Hiltebeitel, "Dying Before the Mahabharata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-Building for Aravan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 467.

(and thus a name provider – *aravāṉi*), and by identifying with Mohini (Krishna's guise as a beautiful woman) they evidently select quite different elements from the same myth.

With this approach, I am not interested in historicizing, chronologizing, and searching for *ur*-stories of these myths, all of which would be a "nineteenth-century game that we no longer play."[326] Instead, I am concerned with how all these different versions contribute to a larger puzzle in which tellers of a story also become its characters, exploring different forms of embodiments and existence. All these different retellings have a characteristic that Doniger calls polythetic, by borrowing a term from biology "designating a group of items that share a number of common characteristics, without any one of these being essential for membership in the group or class in question."[327] By focusing on the perspective of only one mythological character and his or her story, rather than another, we can radically change the "original" narrative. All the epic stories mentioned here do that in one way or another. In addition, one more *story* of the radical interpretation of the *Ramayana* epic needs to be addressed in order to illustrate a very important dimension of twentieth-century Tamiḻakam: the self-respect ideology of E. V. Ramasamy, also known as Periyar.

E. V. Ramasamy (1879-1973), also known as Periyar, was a social activist, and freedom fighter, born in modern Tamil Nadu (although of Telugu decent), who strongly advocated against gender and caste discrimination, and denounced the northern Sanskritic and brahmanical influences as oppressive for Dravidian people (inhabitants of South India

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[326] Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation* (Oxford University Press, 2006): 8.

[327] Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation* (Oxford University Press, 2006): 8.

who speak Dravidian languages such as Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu).[328] Paula Richman has demonstrated how throughout his life Periyar vehemently attacked the viciousness of brahmanical oppression by interpreting the story of the young prince Rama from Rāvaṇa's point of view (in the Sanskrit version, the main antagonist in the epic narratives). For Periyar, Rama is a symbol of a foreign, North Indian despot and Ravana the personification of Dravidian people, and thus the true hero of the epic.

Periyar's progressive ideology led to expression of women's issues through initiatives such as the "Self-Respect movement" which mostly manifested in "Self-Respect" ceremonies, such as the wedding ritual, in which Vedic rituals and symbols of women's enslavement to men were rejected. The movement also promoted intercaste marriage, widow remarriage, abortion, equal rights, and women's control over reproductive process. Political parties such as the DMK (*Dravida Munnetra Kazagham*, or Progressive Dravidian Federation) and AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, or All India Anna Dravidian Progress Federation) in Tamil Nadu are ideological inheritors of Periyar's teachings.[329]

Richman incisively remarks in her paper on Periyar's radical reversal of the *Ramayana* main narrative that it is the DMK party with its film-making political celebrities (C. N. Annadurai, Mu. Karunanidhi, and Shivaji Ganesan) that much more effectively disseminated Periyar's progressive ideologies than, often controversial, Periyar himself. In Richman's words, "If E.V.R. [Periyar] was the great polemicist in the public arena, the

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[328] See Richman, Paula. "E. V. Ramasami's Reading of the Ramayana." In *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, edited by Paula Richman, 175–202. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

[329] Paula Richman, "E. V. Ramasami's Reading of the Ramayana," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 194-5.

DMK went further, transforming grass-roots Dravidian sentiment into institutionalized political power."[330]

For this study, it is important to note thus that Tamil transgender women's engagement with political activism and representation in the last decade of the twentieth century was greatly assisted by Periyar's progressive ideologies put forward earlier in the century, and have been continuously disseminated by major Tamil political parties such as DMK and AIDMK until the present day. I believe that it is this particular political context that urged Tamil transgender women to seek help from state services which resulted in the destabilization of the traditional tirunangai kinship groupings into *jamaats*, prevalent in other parts of India, as documented in the studies by Gayatri Reddy in Hyderabad, Serena Nanda in an undisclosed northern Indian city (most likely New Delhi), Lawrence Cohen in Varanasi, and so on.

In other words, without the need to depend on the *jamaats* (with their own rigid and oppressive structures, as we have seen from the descriptions of Revathi's and Smiley's publications), but rather uplifted by the progressive ideologies focusing on self-respect (*suya-mariyātai*), Tamil transgender women speak for the first time in the known history of South Asia for themselves. Therefore, if we view Andal's and other Tamil bhakti saints' compositions as some of the most original and expressive first-person narratives in South Asian literature, then we also must give our due respect (and respect, *mariyātai*, is, after all, what transgender women are after) to the authors of the first transgender self-narratives in India: Revathi, Living Smile Vidya and Priya Babu. I do this in Chapters 2 and 3.

In Chapter 2, I look at Living Smile Vidya's *Nān Vitiyā* ('I Am Vidya,' 2007) and Revathi's *Veḷḷai moḻi* (published in English as *The Truth about Me*, 2010) as cases of queer

[330] Ibid., 195.

performativity negotiating painful experiences of shame caused by relentless ostracizing from the very early age. I accentuate tirunangai self-narratives as the paradigms of performative writing, following Eve Sedgwick's scholarship on the relationship between gay performativity and shame. In this chapter, I also engage with Ann Cvetkovich's concept of queer trauma, as well as with Michael Jackson's work on storytelling as a powerful palliative for trauma victims.

As I explain in the introductory essay, I take these self-narratives to be instances of "coming out," that Sedgwick in general understands as "a way of staking one's claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of the representational contract between one's body and one's world."[331] In other words, by publicly outing their personal traumatic experiences, and by loudly articulating their dreams, fears and desires, Revathi and Smiley announce to Tamiḻakam (Tamil public sphere; in this case, also the "world") that Tamil transgender women will never be silent again, and, most importantly, that they can and will represent their own transgender selves in a *veḷḷai moḻi* [lit. 'white language'], a language so pure in its intensity that it is *flawless*,

I use the word "flawless" here on purpose, having in mind the contemporary American usage of this expression by some young gay and transgender people (meaning 'perfect, great,' or, to use an older loan from the gay world, 'fabulous'), but I am primarily thinking here of Beyoncé's feminist anthem *Flawless* from 2013. It is especially in the latter where I see this word taking on the connotations that resemble Sedgwick's and Moon's playful discussion of "divinity," a feeling or attitude that radiates forth as the result of a complex interplay between a subject's experience of abjection and his or her need to

[331] Moon, Michael, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "Divinity: A Dossier a Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion." *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 12–39: 27.

defy it through performativity. In a recent newspaper article, a journalist describes the importance of this word in the context of American feminism:

> "It's perhaps our first untroubled word for human beauty, free of the whiff of sexism that clings to many others. It doesn't denote marriageability (like "nubile") or beauty born of fragility ("comely"). Unlike its close relations "fair," "perfect" and "immaculate," it carries no overt religious connotations. And unlike "beautiful" itself, with its associations of perishability and status, "flawless" feels vigorous."[332]

I am intrigued by Beyoncé's body-language in the video for *Flawless*, especially in its latter part: in her dance, Beyoncé's body seems as if suddenly possessed of a new presence like a possessed devotee in a South Asian Goddess temple or a *sufi* shrine who lets her body twitch and eyes bulge out. Diana Eck in her study of the concept of *darśan* in Hinduism, remarks that "one of the ways in which the gods can be recognized when they move among people on this earth is by their unblinking eyes."[333]

Following a sampled excerpt of a TED Talk speech by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie ("We Should All Be Feminists"),[334] Beyoncé declaims, "You wake up, flawless/ Post up, flawless/ Ride round in it, flawless/ Flossin' on that,

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[332] See Sehgal, Parul. "How 'Flawless' Became a Feminist Declaration." *The New York Times*, March 24, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/29/magazine/how-flawless-became-a-feminist-declaration.html.

[333] Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Columbia University Press, 1998): 7.

[334] TEDx Talks. *We Should All Be Feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | TEDxEuston*. Accessed June 4, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc#action=share. The song and the video for *Flawless* are started and ended by the excerpts of a video of Beyoncé's childhood singing-competition (little girls against a group of adult men on a TV show hosted by an elderly white man).

flawless,"[335] as she coolly silhouettes with her hands around her body (*her* "diamond," *her* "rock")[336], not to draw attention to its sex-appeal, but to the fact that it is there and hers in all its magnificence, and that she, Queen Bey (as Beyoncé is also known), fully realizes ("I woke up like this")[337], how objectified and simplistically identified her black woman's body has been in a society defined by white male desires, and that she will not allow it any more (I interpret is hence as a coming out, "representational contract"). Beyoncé unveils her Diva. Her *Shakti*.[338] And each time the back vocals say "flawless," it sounds like they chant: "Goddess!"

Veḷḷai moḻi, we have learned from Revathi's autobiography of the same title, literally means white or pure language in Tamil. I suggested earlier that this idiom has the implication of "coming out clean" of something by telling the truth, but it should also be noted that this phrasing also brings us back to Tamil bhakti literature. Namely, in the language of Tamil bhakti, the basic composition consisting of ten-eleven stanzas is called

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[335] According to the Urban Dictionary website and my friends acquainted with contemporary American urban idioms, "post up" is used as a verb meaning 'claiming a spot as yours,' while to "floss" means 'to proudly display something.'

[336] C. G. Jung says the following on the significance of diamond symbolism in alchemy, and in human psyche: "So it is the same idea as in alchemy—that the earth had been transformed into a transparent, waterlike, yet hard and imperishable, incorruptible structure. Therefore, the philosopher's stone is the expression of the highest perfection of the earthly body, and, therefore, you also find the idea that the *lapis philosophorum* is man himself, that is, his *corpus glorificatum*, his body at the Resurrection. This immortal body is the subtle body that had left the physical body and is beyond corruption. The diamond, the hardest mineral, is synonymous with the *lapis philosophorum*. This is ancient metaphysics, old speculation in symbolic form. What does this mean psychologically? It was mentioned that the *diaphanitas* and the stoniness, the inelasticity, could have to do with the nature of consciousness. You can find this connection in the old texts of alchemy, the idea, that is, that the stone is the product of a mental operation, the equivalent, so to speak, of *enlightenment*. Therefore the stone says in a Hermetic text: "I create the light, the light that is greater than all other lights in the world." So what is actually meant is a phenomenon of consciousness, a product of human effort, and at the same time a *donum gratiae*, a gift of God's grace" (C. G. Jung, *Children's Dreams: Notes from the Seminar Given in 1936-1940*, ed. Lorenz Jung and Maria Meyer-Grass, trans. Ernst Falzeder and Tony Woolfson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010): 221-2).

[337] Ibid.

[338] *Śakti* is another name for Goddess in Hinduism, meaning 'force, power.'

a *tirumoḻi*, lit. a 'good' (or 'holy'), 'word' or 'saying'. Revathi's title hence resembles the titles of bhakti works, and especially the one by Nammalavar titled *Tiru-vāymoḻi* (*vāy* meaning 'mouth' in Tamil), due to its phonetic similarity. Revathi's autobiography has already been translated into English as *The Truth about Me*,[339] but if it were not I would gladly propose *Speaking Flawlessly* as one of the suggestions for the English title (also near-rhyming with 'honestly').[340]

Before I bring this dissertation's concluding essay to its end, I will offer some ideas on first-person reflexivity articulated in the third person in Tamil, and thus also briefly discuss Priya Babu's short novel *Mūṉṟām pāliṉ mukam* ('the face of the third gender'), the first novel in India written by a transgender person. Even though I absolutely agree with Sedgwick that a true "coming out" can only happen in the first-person singular, I think it is worthwhile to discuss third-person narrative voices in light of Sedgwick's "periperformative utterances." More generally, here I also want to illustrate some unique linguistic features of the Tamil language, and thus suggest that we should not be limited to analyzing first-personhood only in first-person narratives.

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339 Revathi. *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010.

340 A more focused study comparing bhakti and tirunangai linguistic expression should evidently be in order, and especially by taking an account of Andal, the only woman among the twelve Tamil bhakti poets (*Āḻvārs*) who dedicated their heart-felt songs to the Hindu god Vishnu in his many incarnations, primarily Krishna. In Andal's poetry, the myths of Vishnu's great deeds and her own fantasies of inhabiting these mythical worlds coexist often at the same time, while these two narrative orders are also juxtaposed to what seems to be the Andal as a "real" girl growing up in medieval Tamil India. Andal's poetry abounds with self-reflection and unbridled emotionalism, *reflected* perhaps literally in her later hagiographies in an episode in which Andal's father Periyāḻvar, the priest of a Vishnu temple, stumbles upon Andal admiring herself in a mirror while wearying a garland dedicated to Vishnu. This is, in turn, reflected in the actual temple architecture in Andal's hometown Srivilliputhur, where the mirror and many other objects and animals populating Andal's poetic world can be found in the temple architecture and town planning. For more information on the physical and ritual embodiments of Andal's poetry see Archana Venkatesan's doctoral thesis "Āṇṭāḷ and Her Magic Mirror: Her Life as a Poet in the Guises of the Goddess: The Exegetical Strategies of Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇavas in the Apotheosis of Āṇṭāḷ," 2004.

Let me first address the latter. We can often find in literature on Tamil linguistics that the distinction between direct and indirect speech is not exactly precise in Tamil.[341] What is the reason for this ambiguity? In Tamil, the main indicator of reported speech is the quotative complementizer *enru*, historically derived from the past participle of the verb *eṉ* (verb 'say'). This quotative complementizer follows, in a sentence, the sample of reported speech, and is then further followed by the finite verb, usually an utterance verb (*col* 'say', *kēḷ* 'ask'), or a cognitive verb (*niṉai* 'think', *teri* 'know'), desiderative verb (*ācaippaṭu*, 'desire'), and emotive verb (*payappaṭu*, 'be afraid').[342]

In complex sentences where *eṉṟu* is used as a quotative, ambiguity occurs depending on whether the subjects of the main and embedded clause are coreferential or not. Let us look at an example: *Murukaṉ nān vīṭṭukku pōy ṭivi pārppēṉ eṉṟu coṉṉār*.[343]

If the subject 'I' of the embedded clause is coreferential with Murugan, then we can interpret the clause as a case of direct speech (Murugan said: "I will go home and watch TV."). If this is not the case and the 'I' of the embedded clause refers to a person who is reporting to somebody else on what Murugan said about that person, then we can interpret the embedded clause as a case of indirect speech (Murugan said that *I* [not Murugan] would go home and watch TV).[344]

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341 See Bhadriraju Krishnamurti, *The Dravidian Languages* (Cambridge University Press, 2003): 452; Thomas Lehmann, *A Grammar of Modern Tamil* (Pondicherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture, 1989): 375-377; Sanford B. Steever, "Direct and Indirect Discourse in Tamil," in *Reported Discourse: A Meeting Ground for Different Linguistic Domains*, eds. Tom Güldemann and Manfred von Roncador (John Benjamins Publishing, 2002): 103.

342 Krishnamurti *Dravidian Languages*, 451; Lehmann, *A Grammar of Modern Tamil*, 323.

343 Murugan (name) - I - house (Dative) - go (verb. part.) - TV - watch (fut. 1st person sg.) - *enru* – say (past 3rd person sg.).

344 *Eṉṟu* is not the only non-finite verb form used as a quotative complementizer in Tamil. *Eṉa*, the infinitival form of the verb *eṉ* occurs as a high literary register alternative form in most contexts in which *eṉṟu* occurs. When *eṉpatu*, the future verbal noun, embeds a clause it embeds it as a noun phrase. As such, *eṉpatu* complementizers take the accusative case marker because they become direct objects of the utterance and cognitive verbs. When *eṉṟa*, the past adjectival participle of *eṉ*, embeds a clause into a sentence, then the

Without getting more entangled in the workings of Tamil grammar, let me give you two simpler examples of the 1st-3rd-person blur that often marks this language. I have always been confused by the way a speaker of Tamil answers the phone. For example, let us say Smiley answers the phone. She would say, in a spoken register of Tamil:[345] *Smiley pēc(u)rēṉ*, lit. meaning 'Smiley [*am*] speaking,' instead of *Smiley pēc(u)rā*, 'Smiley [*is*] speaking [3rd sg. f.],' which we would expect following the logic of an Indo-European language such as English. A somewhat similar case can be found in Smiley's poem, in which the finite verb *niṟkiṟāḷ*, '[she is] standing,' agrees with the subject *peṇ*, 'woman,' who is equaled to *nāṉ*, 'I,' by the *eṉum* coordination (see fn. 33). In literal translation, Smiley says: 'A woman called I is standing majestically.'

Another example of the grammatical-person blur in Tamil appears in the so called ideophones, which are uninflected onomatopoeic forms. They are quite frequently used in both written and spoken varieties of Tamil. They usually consist of an onomatopoeic word, or repeated two words, followed by the quotatives *eṉṟu* or *eṉa*. For example: *nēṟṟu rāttiri muḻuvatum maḷai paṭapaṭa eṉṟu peyṭukoṇṭirukkiraṭu*.[346]

In this sentence, *paṭapaṭa* denotes a kind of a rattling or pattering sound so we could translate it as: 'All last night rain gently fell with a pattering sound.' However, if we

clause it embeds has the status of an adjectival clause. The form *eṉṉum* functions just as *eṉṟa* does, and the only difference is in style or register (Lehmann, *A Grammar of Modern Tamil*, 375-8.

345 Like some other languages with long literary traditions, Tamil has been diglossic for centuries and has differentiated between high (*centamiḻ*) and low (*koṭuntamiḻ*) varieties of the language. In modern Tamil there is a precise differentiation between what is most commonly referred to as written or literary, used for writing and formal speech, and spoken Tamil, used in everyday conversation and conversational parts of prose literature. The differences between these two varieties exist on all linguistic levels: in particular, on the phonological and lexical levels, to a lesser degree on the morphological level, and still less on the syntactical level. Written Tamil is standardized and supraregional, whereas spoken Tamil demonstrates significant differences in geographic and social dialects (Bhadriraju Krishnamurti, *The Dravidian Languages* (Cambridge University Press, 2003): 7).

346 Yesterday – night – whole – rain – *paṭapaṭa* [onomatopoeic sound of gentle rain falling] – *eṉṟu* (quotative) – fall (past continuous 3rd sg. neut.)

resuscitate the semantics of the quotative *enṟu* we could also imbibe a sense of the sentence's literal meaning: 'All last night the rain fell saying *paṭapaṭa*.' Besides, these ideophones are not only restricted to sounds, but can also be used to connote visual and other senses' stimuli, especially intense ones. For example, *avaḷuṭaiya cirippu paḷapaḷaveṉṟu miṉṉiyatu*, when translated into idiomatic English means 'her smile glimmered brightly,' but, literally, it is 'her smile glimmered saying *paḷapaḷa*.'

Basically, what I am implying here is that in Tamil 1st person is implied much more often for cases in which the 3rd person would be used in English instead. Because of this feature, third-person human and non-human objects often seem to be imparted with a voice of their own, while the ambiguity between direct and indirect reporting is regularly blurred because of the inconsistency in the subject-predicate agreement between the embedded and non-embedded clause.

However, I do not need to look for these grammatical signs of authorial presence in Priya Babu's novel because it suffices to read the preface to realize that Priya Babu has a specific plan for framing her book. Before I talk about this rhetorical strategy, let me provide some basic facts about the book (I provide biographical data about the author in Chapter 3). *Mūṉṟām pāliṉ mukam* ('the face of the third gender') came out in 2008, the same year tirunangais could for the first time officially identify on Tamil government-issued food ration cards as transgender political subjects, and only a year after Priya's ethnographic study of her community came out.[347] The novel's edition is rather slim at just around a hundred pages (with particularly large Tamil fonts), but Priya packs as many as thirteen chapters into it, which are mostly comprised of dialogues. Almost every chapter is prefaced by the name of a place where the dialogue happens, all of them in contemporary

[347] Babu, Priya. *Mūṉṟām Pāliṉ Mukam*. Chennai: Cantiyā Patippakam, 2008.

Chennai. Descriptions are minimal and merely framing the bulkier dialogue sections. In other words, in terms of genre, Priya's novel uncannily resembles a screenplay.[348]

The hero of the novel is a teenager called Ramēṣ (Ramesh), born and perceived by others as a boy, but feeling and, secretly, acting like a girl. Ramesh is raised in, what seems like, a relatively typical Tamil middle-class family. He goes to college and has a very close relationship with her mother Pārvati but fears to disclose her true feelings even to his mother. Parvati knows, however (as mothers often do), that Ramesh is not like other boys: she hears him sing like a Tamil cinema heroine at the very beginning of the novel, and hears gossip about his feminine behavior from the neighbors and Ramesh's older siblings, Raku (Ragu) and Leṭcumi (Lakshmi). Parvati confides in Kaṇmaṇi, a social worker for transgender women, whom Parvati meets on the train and who consoles her by telling her to allow Ramesh become a woman, as Ramesh wishes to. Parvathi accepts this advice. But it was too late. Ramesh, meets transgender women in the market and comes home dressed like a woman. When Ramesh's father sees her, he does not recognize her at first, but when he does, he becomes enraged, beats her and chases her away, yelling in derision and contempt.

Her father's and brother's disgust prompts Ramesh to search for a new home and she meets a tirunangai Jānakiyammā who offers her home where she can live in peace and quiet, as Ramesh learns more and more about herself under the wise guidance of her foster mother. She changes her name into Pārati (Bharati). Parvati, feeling crushed, reaches out to Bharati and introduces her to Kanmani who helps her arrange a sex reassignment surgery at a hospital. Bharati slowly realizes that her place is with her fellow-tirunangais, especially considering her father's and brother's aggressive animosity toward her, and in an emotional

[348] See Chapter 2 for similar cinematic influences in Smiley's autobiography.

ending Bharati says farewell to her mother. She promises her that she will not beg, that she will study, and that she will prosper thanks to thousands of good hearts waiting out there (*āyiram nalla itayaṅkaḷ*).[349]

Both in her novel and her ethnography, Priya explores the formality of genre (just as she is interested in formality and regularity in ritual) to offer similar lessons about the true nature of tirunangais which are formulated by means of descriptions of feelings, dreams, and longings. Mastering rules of genre – which is, just as language, a tool assisting a person tell one's story – is related to my claim (Chapter 3) that Priya's ethnography be the most fully realized "representational contract,"[350] of all the tirunangai texts studied here because Priya Babu uses the greatest oppressor of all, an alien epistemological system (in the form of ethnography as a genre), to claim the privilege of nomenclature and definitions of all things tirunangai.

By taking the genre of ethnography into her own hands (insistence on "owning one's story"), Priya Babu effectively strikes against the antiquated ethnographic definitions of her and her *iṉam*, 'race.' Priya's main goals are: 1) to shift the definition of who transgender women are (from the biological the psychological); 2) to underscore her community's sense of solidarity due to shared experiences of trauma and oppression; 3) to demonstrate to mainstream society that her community has all the cultural elements as any other Indian religious or ethnic community, and that therefore tirunangais can and must join the ranks of mainstream society as rightful citizens.

Priya's novel, essentially, reiterates all of these messages, but to insure these messages are not misinterpreted, she also provides a preface titled *Aravāṇiyiṉ kaṉavum ēkkamum*, 'Tirunangais' Dreams and Longings,' composed in a strikingly bold and original

[349] Priya Babu, *Mūṉrām pāliṉ mukam* (Chennai: Cantiyā Patippakam, 2008): 107.

[350] Ibid.

language. In an age in which people's minds slowly die, Priya informs us, tricked by science and its robots, she has joined the line of those who recover lost identities.[351] And then she clearly articulates the goal of writing her novel:

> "It is my duty as a representative of my community to release this novel. By means of this novel, I have eagerly tried to open at least people's minds, by recording my, and my fellow-tirunangais' desires, feelings, expectations, and dreams. The story of this novel's heroine, Bharati, is not a figment of imagination. It is a collection of experiences that happen to many tirunangais, in many situations.[352]

Just as she does in her ethnography, Priya Babu emphasizes the importance of tirunangai foster families for the crushed spirits and bodies of transgender women deserted by their families and loved ones. Jananakiyamma, the heroine's tirunangai foster-mother is depicted as the epitome of compassion and wisdom. Her story essentially mirrors Bharati's and thus Priya again, as in her ethnography, insists on the shared experience of the tirunangai suffering, but also of friendship, and companionship.

Other characters from the novel are in some respects, too, like personae or stock characters than developed and realistic personalities. They have, in other words, a pedagogical purpose, in accordance with the overall tone of the book. Thus, for example, Kanmani, the social worker is portrayed like a veritable angel, who first assuages Parvati's

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351 "Rōpōkkaḷai uruvākkum viññāṉattiṉ cūḻcciyāl maṉitarkaḷ mella mella maṉaṅkaḷil maṭintu pōyuḷḷaṉar… iḻanta aṭaiyāḷaṅkaḷai mīṭṭeṭukkum varicaiyil itō nāṉum cērntu koṇṭēṉ" (Chennai: Cantiyā Patippakam, 2008): 8 (ibid., 7).

352 "…oru camūkap piratinitiyāy eṉakkāṉa kaṭamaiyum iruppatiṉ veḷippāṭē inta nāval. eṉṉilum, eṉṉai cārnta aravāṇiyar camūkattiṉ ēkkaṅkaḷ, uṇarvukaḷ, etirppārppukaḷ, kaṉavukaḷ iṅkē pativākiyuḷḷaṉa. maṉitaṉiṉ maṉamāvatu tiṟakkātā eṉṟa tiṭamāṉa ēkkattuṭaṉ inta nāvaliṉ vāyilāka muyaṟcittuḷḷēṉ. inta nāvaliṉ nāyaki pāratiyiṉ katai kaṟpaṉaiyalla. pala cūḻalkaḷil pala aravāṇikaḷukku naṭanta campavaṅkaḷiṉ kōrvaiyē" (Priya Babu, *Mūṉṟām pāliṉ mukam* (ibid., 7).

worried thoughts about her son, and later helps Ramesh get the needed surgery to become a woman. Kanmani's husband, Vacutēvaṉ (Vasudevan), is, unlike Ramesh's father, the model of a heterosexual Tamil man who deeply feels for the tirunangais' often deplorable lives, and who, unlike others who feel but do not act, helps his wife in her charitable efforts.

The name Priya chooses for her heroine is Bharati, which is significant on two levels: first, it reminds us of the great Tamil, and Indian, writer and social activist Bharathi Chinnaswami Subramania Bharathi, and, second, it provides her heroine a pan-Indian name. In her ethnography, Priya makes little, if any, distinction between Tamil tirunangais and other transgender women in India. For her, they are all *aravāṉis* (as she still uses that term, at that time) who were, either, glorified as wise and noble courtiers (court of Nizam of Hyderabad), or vilified as freaks of nature by the colonial ethnographers. *Bhārat*, is the official name of India in many Indian languages (not Tamil), and Bharati could therefore simply mean "an Indian woman." The choice of Bharati's name, then, could be likened to, let us say, the name *America* given to the heroine of a novel about American transgender women. Bharati is thus like Mohini, Krishna as Aravan's wife, the embodiment of the all transgender women's desires and longings.

If I am to read *Mūṉṟām pāliṉ mukam* as a bildungsroman (lit. "novel" [*roman*] of "formation, education" [*bildung*]), which it certainly is, then I also have to understand Parvati's character as one experiencing transformation, the *bildung*, not only the heroine Bharati's. Because it is not only Kanmani who helps Parvati come to terms with her son being a transgender person; it is also, Priya Babu seems to suggest, Parvati's womanhood and motherhood that help her accept her child's dramatic transformations. This would make Parvati completely unlike her husband and older son Ragu who embody violent masculine intolerance toward transgender people. Even though Parvati cannot have Bharati stay with her, because of her husband's inability to negotiate the stigma and shame arisen

by his transgender daughter, we know that she has undergone a profound psychological change, and that this fact serves as a model to all people that we can positively change our perception of others.

It is Vasudevan, Kanmani's husband, who most concisely articulates *Mūṉṟām pāliṉ mukam*'s message of why society needs to accept tirunangais. It is because "they suffered a lot," and, therefore, "we must give them our love and support and accept them as one of us."[353] But, as Revathi's real-life husband exemplifies, even social workers and well-wishing people fail when they have to deal with the personal experience of having transgender persons in their own families. Revathi recounts in her memoir how she married, in an informal ceremony, a social worker who worked at the same NGO as she did. After a year or so of being married, he left her because she could not get pregnant. His family, even though they, supposedly, accepted Revathi as a transgender woman, could not accept the fact he would not be able to have children with her.[354]

It was this particular episode in Revathi's book that, after my own personal loss, brought me closer to understanding the everyday trauma in the life, not of Tamil transgender people in general, but of a single Tamil transgender woman. A thought of Revathi – alone and broken, yet bravely insisting on writing about her life experiences even though the memory of shame and loss brought her pain – stuck with me, and, later, coupled with Sedgwick's theorizing on shame and performativity, this thought directed me toward the idea of the ethnography of empathy, as the only ethical and meaningful mode of writing about (and thus representing) others, which I suggest in this dissertation's Introduction.

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353 "avaṅka rompa pāvappaṭṭavaṅka. nām aṉpum aravaṇaippum koṭuttu nampaḷla oruttarā ēttukka vēṇṭiyavaṅka" (Ibid., 86).

354 Revathi, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010): 212-213.

In short, by trying to defend my positionality as a scholar whose work represents others, I realized in a series of epiphanies, that I had become obsessed with representation because I was afraid of facing my own identities for various shame-associated reasons. As Sedgwick pronounces: "shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly *individuating*."[355] As I came out to myself about being in the closet about a number of my identities, I realized that if I wanted to write about others, anyone really, then I had to face my own self, as dispassionately as possible, while doing so. In other words, writing about others includes and precludes probing and writing myself. And this makes me happy because coming out is tremendously freeing. Thus I recommend this particular approach also to others as a therapy to our tired, dishonest and unfulfilling academic routines.

In conclusion within conclusion, a poem to illustrate this dissertation's preoccupation with genre (an epistemological system which, like language, is always manipulated by powers structures), and with itself:

PHALAŚRUTI

Thus spoke Niko,
Mending his broken heart,
In the city of Austin
Where the sky is of endless blue,
About the glorious deeds of
Smiley, Revathi and Priya,

[355] Emphasis mine from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2003): 36.

Transgender women of Tamil Nadu,

Who, from the hands of ethnographers,

took the one story about them

Made it many, and thus made a change.

Whoever reads this *story* will in fact bathe

in tirunangais' majestic presence,

recover their lost face

and, with a healed voice,

speak flawlessly.[356]

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[356] *Phalaśruti* is a stanza at the end of a bhakti poem in which the poet presents him/herself, the main points in the poem, and the reward for reciting or mediating upon the poem. It is, in other words, a type of conclusion. Here is an example of a phalaśruti from Andal's *Nācciyārtirumoḻi*:

Kōtai of Viṣṇucittaṉ
king of Putuvai
city of towering mansions that rise like mountains
sang this garland of sweet Tamiḻ
to plead with Kāmadeva
with his sugarcane bow and five-flower arrows
to unite her with the lord
who broke the tusk of the elephant
as it screamed in agony,
who ripped apart the beak of the bird
that one dark and lustrous as a gem.
Those who sing this soft song of plea
will remain forever at the feet
of the supreme king of the gods.
(Andal, *The Secret Garland: Antal's Tiruppavai and Nacciyar Tirumoli*, trans. Archana Venkatesan, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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